

# The Benefits of Coarse Preferences

Joseph Y. Halpern\*      Yuval Heller<sup>†</sup>      Eyal Winter<sup>‡§</sup>

September 22, 2024

## Abstract

We study the strategic benefits of coarsening one’s utility by clustering payoffs together. Our solution concept, *coarse-utility equilibrium (CUE)* requires that (1) each player maximizes her coarse utility, given the opponent’s strategy, and (2) the classifications form best replies to one another. We characterize CUEs in various games. In particular, we show that there is a qualitative difference between CUEs in which only one of the players clusters payoffs and those in which all players cluster their payoffs, and that, in the latter type of CUE, players treat other players better than they do in Nash equilibria in games with monotone externalities.

**Keywords:** Categorization, language, indirect evolutionary approach, monotone externalities, strategic complements, strategic substitutes.      **JEL codes:** C73, D83

## 1 Introduction

Choice often relies on comparisons. To ease comparisons and overcome cognitive limitations, people may cluster things into categories. [Dienhart \(1999\)](#) refers to such categories as “mental boxes”, each of which consists of outcomes or situations that are regarded as identical. Prices often end in .99, since people seem to put prices like \$19.97, \$19.98, and \$19.99 into the same mental box, while putting \$20.00 into a different box. (See [Strulov-Shlain, 2019](#) for some recent work on and an overview of this well-researched topic.) In a single-agent

---

\*Computer Science Department, Cornell University. email: [halpern@cs.cornell.edu](mailto:halpern@cs.cornell.edu).

<sup>†</sup>Department of Economics, Bar-Ilan University. email: [yuval.heller@biu.ac.il](mailto:yuval.heller@biu.ac.il).

<sup>‡</sup>Management School, Lancaster University, and Department of Economics, The Hebrew University. email: [mseyal@mscc.huji.ac.il](mailto:mseyal@mscc.huji.ac.il).

<sup>§</sup>YH gratefully acknowledges the financial support of the European Research Council (#677057), the Israeli Science Foundation (#2443/19), and the Binational Israel-US Science Foundation (#2020022). JH acknowledges support from NSF grants IIS-178108 and IIS-1703846 and MURI grant W911NF-19-1-0217.

decision-making context, the level of refinement into which these categories partition situations depends on both the severity of the cognitive constraints and the benefit that can be accrued by a more refined classification (clustering). If the mental cost of memory in the learning process is low or the stakes are high, the classification is likely to be highly refined. If the decision process requires a fast decision or the stakes are low, we would expect a much coarser classification (see, e.g., [Netzer, 2009](#); [Robson et al., 2023](#)).

In interactive game situations, coarsening introduces new complexities, since players must take into account the coarsenings used by other players. A player’s classification of outcomes may affect the beliefs of other players and hence their behavior. Therefore, in addition to the standard cost-benefit effect in the single-agent case, in game environments strategic effects may arise as well. The purpose of this paper is to study these strategic effects, and the way they alter equilibrium behavior. To this end, we introduce an equilibrium concept that we call *coarse utility equilibrium (CUE)* for strategic games, where the players’ choice of classification is derived endogenously, as part of the equilibrium.

We briefly outline this solution concept. Rather than considering the coarsening of arbitrary sets of outcomes, we consider coarsening only the set of payoffs (utility levels) of the players. Thus, coarsening results in a player bundling payoffs into equivalence classes, and treating different payoffs that belong to the same class as if they were identical. One way of understanding this process is that all outcomes in an equivalence class are framed in the same way, and the player’s utility depends only on the framing. This process is quite natural in many games. A player might, for example, classify payoffs as “high” or “low”, or “acceptable” or “unacceptable”. Since utilities are real numbers, by coarsening utilities, we can require that if two utilities  $u_1$  and  $u_2$  are in the same category, then so are all utilities in the interval  $[u_1, u_2]$ . This added structure on coarsening plays a key role in our results.

Roughly speaking, our solution concept can be viewed as a subgame-perfect equilibrium of a two-stage game: players first decide on how to cluster outcomes, and then, after observing their counterpart’s clustering, they choose a strategies.<sup>1</sup> By clustering outcomes, a player commits to treating different outcomes as identical. This may affect the strategic behavior of the other players and, in some cases, may yield a strategic advantage to the agent doing the clustering. This means that clustering may turn out to be advantageous even when a player does not have cognitive constraints, as long as the player can credibly commit to treating identically all outcomes that were clustered together.

Our equilibrium conditions impose two best-response requirements, one for each stage

---

<sup>1</sup>In [Appendix B](#) we extend our results to a setup with partial observability in which each player observes her opponent’s clustering with probability  $p < 1$ . We show that all of our results hold for a sufficiently high  $p$ . By contrast, if  $p$  is close to zero, then clustering can induce only Nash equilibria.

Table 1: Matrix Payoffs of a Prisoner’s Dilemma Game (Illustrative Example)

|     | $c$        | $d$       |
|-----|------------|-----------|
| $c$ | 10 $^{10}$ | 0 $^{11}$ |
| $d$ | 11 $^0$    | 1 $^1$    |

of the two-stage game. The first one requires that, based on the clustering used in the first stage of the game, players play a Nash equilibrium in the (strategic-form) game of the second stage (where players are indifferent between any two outcomes that belong to the same cluster). The second one requires that clusterings are optimal with respect to players’ unclustered (material) payoffs, that is, that players best respond to one another, so that their strategies form an equilibrium with respect to the anticipated behavior in the second stage. Hence, one can think of the first stage as a game where a player’s strategy is a commitment to a certain classification of outcomes (i.e., clustering), and its payoffs are determined by the equilibrium outcome that arises from such commitments. We interpret these two stages very differently. The second stage is viewed as a standard strategic game. In contrast, the optimization in the first stage is justified by assuming that players have experience with different classification choices and how others respond to them, and so are able to optimize the classification, taking into account the response.

As an illustration, consider the prisoner’s dilemma game described in Table 1. The fact that defection is the dominant action implies that mutual defection is the unique Nash equilibrium. Consider a pair of players who are both committed to bundling together all payoffs above 10. These players can be viewed as *satisficing*, in the sense of [Simon \(1955\)](#), with an aspiration level of 10. Another interpretation is that this coarse utility might be a commitment to a rounding heuristic: when a player has a two-digit payoff, he pays attention only to the leading digit. Observe that mutual cooperation is an equilibrium given these coarse utilities. Further observe that a player cannot gain a higher material payoff by deviating to a different clustering because the fact that her opponent either obtains a payoff of at least 10 or plays her material best reply limits the deviator’s material payoff to be at most 10. This implies that the mutual cooperation supported by satisficing is a coarse-utility equilibrium.<sup>2</sup>

Our model assumes that players react to their opponent’s clustering, but this assumption does not require that players are cognitively aware of their opponents’ clustering and choose their strategies based on this information. Instead, we view the formation of a player’s classification (and her reaction to the opponent’s classification) as a long-term process of cultural

---

<sup>2</sup>The meta-analysis of [Mengel \(2018\)](#) shows that there is a substantial rate of cooperation (37%) in experiments of the (one-shot) prisoner’s dilemma.

evolution, in which the player’s preferences dynamically change in a way that increases her social fitness, where this fitness is represented by the original payoffs of the game. We refrain from describing a full-fledged model of this process explicitly. Instead, we treat this as a “black box” that delivers an equilibrium outcome with each player’s classification best responding to that of her opponent. Importantly, converging to a behavior that depends on the opponent’s clustering does not require players to be sophisticated, as it can emerge from long-term learning and experimentation (as elaborated in the end of Section 2).

In real life, players often classify outcomes using language, which aids their reasoning and signals their coarsenings to others. Players’ classifications can be seen as a dictionary mapping outcomes to words, serving both to simplify the situation and communicate clustering commitments. This language can be very limited, like high/low or acceptable/unacceptable, or more refined with terms like outstanding or disappointing. We view the first stage of the game as one where players determine how to cluster and communicate their coarsened utility function to the other players.

We define the equilibrium conditions for players’ classification strategies using three variants of CUE. The first variant takes a best response by player  $i$  at stage 1 to be one where there is at least one equilibrium in the second stage where player  $i$  does not gain by deviating. The second variant requires that player  $i$  does not gain by deviating in all equilibria of the stage 2 game. Finally, the third variant requires that player  $i$  does better in all *plausible* equilibria, where an equilibrium is plausible if, should one of the players deviate to a new classification, the players can reach the new equilibrium by a sequence of changes in their play such that, at each step, the player who changes her behavior increases her coarse utility. We believe that the third variant is the most reasonable, and use it for most of our results (we discuss its evolutionary interpretation at the end of Section 2). The weaker concept is less informative, while the stronger one does not always exist.

Our analysis involves two domains of (possibly asymmetric) two-player games. The first is finite normal-form games (where mixed strategies are allowed) and the second is continuum games in which the set of strategies is an interval. We start with a few results that provide some preliminary insights about our proposed solution concepts. We first show that weak CUE gives rise to a folk theorem; the set of equilibria includes all individually rational outcomes. This result also motivates our interest in the two other, more restrictive, variants of CUE. We next consider the relationship between strong CUE and Stackelberg leadership, showing that every Pareto efficient outcome of a game that pays each player at least her Stackelberg payoff is a strong CUE. This latter condition can be interpreted as a requirement that no player can regret not doing something else, under the assumption that his opponents would have best responded to what he would have done.

In Section 3.3, we study two extreme classes of games, zero-sum games and common-interest games. Our interest in these two classes of game is motivated by the fact that the role of commitment is limited in games belonging to these classes. Roughly, if players interests are in complete conflict, and one of them commits to treating two outcomes as if they were identical, then it must be the case that such a commitment makes him better off. But this means that it must make the player who reacts to this commitment worse off, and hence the latter should ignore the commitment and act as if it was never made. Similarly, if players' interests are fully aligned, commitment is superfluous; the players can easily coordinate to arrive at the outcome that maximizes their joint utility. Our results coincide with these intuitions. We show that in a zero-sum game every Nash equilibrium is a strong CUE and every weak CUE yields the minimax value of the game; in common-interest games, the set of CUE outcomes coincides with the set of Nash equilibria, and every strong CUE outcome is a Pareto-efficient Nash equilibrium.

Section 4 provides our main results for interval games. Our analysis here concerns games with monotone externalities (involving both negative and positive externalities), a property shared by many economic applications. Our first result focuses on CUE in which players do not best reply to their unclustered utilities (and hence differ from Nash equilibria). Theorem 1 shows that in such games a player's CUE strategy treats her opponent better than her best reply to her unclustered utility would do. The key observation is that any opponent's reaction to a small deviation of a player must be towards the opponent's best reply to her unclustered utility. This result is surprising, as it applies to the cases of both strategic complements and strategic substitutes, while the existing related literature yields similar results only in games with strategic complements (as discussed in Remark 3). Conceptually, this results implies that bilateral clustering commitments aren't used as threats, but as positive commitments, that is, a promise to treat co-players better than when such a commitment is not made.

We also show that when both players deviate from a CUE towards a profile in which each player's externalities reduce the utility of his co-player, then not only can such a profile not Pareto dominate the CUE, but also no single player can be made better off assuming his co-player further deviates by best responding with his unclustered preferences. This feature of CUEs can be viewed as a stability property, highlighting the fact that in CUEs players utilize their externalities in a cohesive and welfare-enhancing manner.

Next we add the assumption of the game having strategic complementarity, and we show that the two properties we described above, beneficial commitment and stability, become both necessary and sufficient for all CUEs in games with strategic complementarity, and hence fully characterize CUEs for these games.

We next explore CUE outcomes in games with strategic substitution. Interestingly, in

these games there is a sharp distinction between CUEs in which only one player clusters her utility, and CUEs in which both players cluster their utilities. Specifically, in CUEs with only one player (say, Alice) playing the best reply to her unclustered utility, the other player’s (Bob’s) CUE strategy will treat Alice less favorably than would be the case under Bob’s unclustered best reply. Hence, in CUEs in which only one of the players clusters her utility, the clustering-induced commitment is best viewed as a threat rather than a favorable promise (while bilateral CUE commitments are still interpreted as favorable promises).

An important finding of our analysis concerns the comparison of CUE outcomes between games with strategic complementarity and games with strategic substitution. Under complementarity, players who deviate from **their material best replies** make their co-player better off. In contrast, under substitution, players who (unilaterally) deviate from **their material best replies** make their co-player worse off. This deviation structure, as considered by our solution concept, is interesting because it contrasts with other behavioral solution concepts (in particular, those that are based on the idea of altruism or spitefulness), where the deviation from rationality on the cooperation-competition scale is unidirectional.

This feature of our solution concept also connects to some experimental findings showing that when players perceive the strategic environment as competitive, they compete more vigorously, and when they perceive it to be cooperative, they cooperate more willingly, even when rationality prescribes the same behavior (see, e.g, [Goerg and Walkowitz 2010](#)). To illustrate our solution concept in a more applied framework, we provide two examples: a price competition model with differentiated goods (satisfying strategic complementarity) and a Cournot model (satisfying strategic substitutability).

The rest of the paper is structured as follows. In the remainder of this section, we briefly survey the related literature. Section 2 presents our model and solution concept. In Section 3, we present our general results. Section 4 characterizes CUE in Interval games with monotone externalities. We conclude in Section 5. The appendix contains formal proofs and an extension of our model to deal with partial observability of the opponent’s clustering.

## 1.1 Related Literature

Our paper is related to and inspired by three strands of literature. The first includes studies on the impact of categorization in single-agent decision problems. [Mullainathan \(2002\)](#) explores biases from categorical thinking, [Mengel \(2012b\)](#) compares the evolutionary fitness of different categorizations, and [Mohlin \(2014\)](#) investigates optimal categorizations to minimize prediction error. [Horan et al. \(2022\)](#) examines when coarse utility benefits decision makers who perceive alternatives with noise. Unlike these studies, we focus on categorization in

multi-player games, where strategic implications are central to our solution concept.

Other works address categorization in multi-player interactions. [Jehiel \(2005\)](#) and [Jehiel and Koessler \(2008\)](#) analyze multi-stage games where players bundle nodes into "analogy classes." [Azrieli \(2009\)](#) shows that categorizing opponents into groups can lead to efficient outcomes, while [Steiner and Stewart \(2015\)](#) studies price distortions from coarse reasoning, and [Daskalova and Vriend \(2020\)](#) explores how coordinating predictions influences incentives for coarse categorization. A key difference is that in these models, categorization is exogenous, while in ours, it is endogenously determined as part of the solution concept.

Several related papers examine scenarios where players face different games, categorize them, and decide how to play within each category. [Mengel \(2012a\)](#) studies how players learn to bundle games and adjust behavior in each class, a model further developed and tested by [LiCalzi and Mühlenbernd \(2022\)](#). [Heller and Winter \(2016\)](#) explores a solution concept where agents bundle different games with a commitment advantage. [Gauer and Kuzmics \(2020\)](#) show that a player may prefer coarse information about an opponent's utility, even when accurate information is available at a low cost. Our model differs in that players face a single game and bundle intervals of their payoff function, rather than different games.

The second strand of literature includes papers that study the stability of endogenous preferences (the indirect evolutionary approach; see, e.g., [Guth and Yaari, 1992](#); [Dekel et al., 2007](#); [Heifetz et al., 2007b](#); [Friedman and Singh, 2009](#); [Herold and Kuzmics, 2009](#); [Eswaran and Neary, 2014](#); [Winter et al., 2017](#)), and those in which a player can choose a delegate (with different incentives) to play on his behalf (see, e.g., [Fershtman and Kalai, 1997](#); [Dufwenberg and Güth, 1999](#); [Fershtman and Gneezy, 2001](#)). Similar to our model, these papers allow the player's subjective payoffs to differ from the material payoffs, and assume that a deviation to new subjective payoffs induces the players to move to a new equilibrium.

Our paper differs from the papers mentioned above in that we substantially restrict how much the subjective (clustered) utility is allowed to differ from the material (unclustered) utility. The only difference we allow is that of clustering together intervals of outcomes. Intuitively, these are outcomes that the agent commits to regarding as identical (*i.e.*, ones that he would describe the same way). By contrast, the existing literature is much more permissive; it typically allows an agent to have an arbitrary subjective utility, including one in which she prefers a bad outcome to a better outcome. We think that our restriction is reasonable in many setups. For example, students or teachers may cluster grades that are given on the 0-100 scale into coarser categories, viewing grades within the same category as essentially identical (see the related analysis of the optimal coarsening of grades by [Dubey and Geanakoplos, 2010](#)). By contrast, it seems unlikely that students would strictly prefer obtaining a low grade to obtaining a higher grade.

The third strand of literature consists of work studying the role of commitment in strategic situations. This topic has been extensively investigated since the seminal work of Schelling (1960) (see, e.g., Bade et al., 2009; Renou, 2009; Arieli et al., 2017). Our contribution with respect to this literature involves introducing a new commitment device, which seems plausible in many real-life situations: clustering intervals of payoffs together. Our results show that such clustering can result in novel outcomes; for example, equilibria in which only one of the players clusters her payoffs are qualitatively different than those in which both players cluster their payoffs (the two classes of CUEs induce the opposite behaviors in games with strategic substitutes, as shown in Theorems 1 and 3).

## 2 Model

**Underlying Game** Let  $G = (S, \pi)$  be a two-player normal-form game (which we refer to as the *underlying game*), where:

1.  $S = S_1 \times S_2$  is the set of strategy profiles, where each  $S_i$  is a convex and compact subset of a Euclidean space that represents the set of strategies of player  $i \in \{1, 2\}$ ;
2.  $\pi = (\pi_1, \pi_2)$  is the profile of unclustered (material) utilities, where each  $\pi_i : S \rightarrow \mathbb{R}$  is a function assigning each player  $i \in \{1, 2\}$  a payoff for each strategy profile.

We use  $i \in \{1, 2\}$  as an index referring to one of the players. Let  $-i$  denote the opponent of player  $i$ . We assume each payoff function  $\pi_i(s_i, s_{-i})$  is continuous in all parameters and is weakly concave in the player's own strategy ( $s_i$ ). For each two strategies  $s_i, s'_i \in S_i$  and each  $\alpha \in (0, 1)$ , let  $(1 - \alpha) \cdot s_i + \alpha \cdot s'_i \in S_i$  denote the strategy that is a convex combination of  $s_i$  and  $s'_i$ . Strategy profile  $s$  is *interior* if  $s_i \in \text{Int}(S_i)$  for each player  $i$ .

We are particularly interested in two classes of underlying games: interval games and finite games. We say that the game is an *interval game* if each  $S_i$  is a bounded interval in  $\mathbb{R}$  (e.g., each player chooses a real number representing quantity, price, or effort).<sup>3</sup> We say that the game is a *finite game* if each  $S_i$  is a simplex over a finite set of pure actions (i.e.,  $S_i = \Delta(A_i)$ , where  $A_i$  is finite), and each  $\pi_i$  is a von Neumann–Morgenstern payoff function (i.e., it is linear with respect to the mixing probabilities).

With a slight abuse of notation we identify a pure action  $a_i$  with the degenerate strategy that assigns probability one to the action  $a_i$ . Note that a two-action game (in which  $|A_i| = 2$  for each player  $i$ ) is both a finite game and an interval game (where we identify each strategy  $s_i$  with the probability it assigns to the first pure action).

---

<sup>3</sup>We do not allow players to randomize in interval games.



Let  $BR_i : S_{-i} \rightarrow S_i$  denote the (unclustered) *best-reply correspondence*, and let  $BRP_i : S_{-i} \rightarrow \mathbb{R}$  denote the best-reply (unclustered) payoff; that is,

$$BR_i(s_{-i}) = \operatorname{argmax}_{s_i \in S_i} (\pi_i(s_i, s_{-i})), \quad BRP_i = \max_{s_i \in S_i} (\pi_i(s_i, s_{-i})).$$

The continuity and weak concavity of  $\pi_i$  implies that  $BR_i(s_{-i})$  is a non-empty closed convex set, which in turn implies that the game has a Nash equilibrium. If  $\pi_i$  is strictly concave, then  $BR_i(s_{-i})$  is a singleton (in which case  $BR_i$  is a single-valued function).

In an interval game we say that strategy profile  $s'$  is lower than strategy  $s$  (denoted by  $s' < s$ ) if  $s'_i < s_i$  for each player  $i$ . Similarly, we write  $s_i \leq BR_i(s_{-i})$  (resp.,  $s_i \geq BR_i(s_{-i})$ ) if  $s_i$  is weakly lower (resp., higher) than all elements of the set  $BR_i(s_{-i})$ .

**Coarse-Utility Game** We allow players to cluster together intervals of payoffs as equivalent outcomes. Formally, a *clustering* is a weakly increasing function  $f_i : \mathbb{R} \rightarrow \mathbb{R}$ . The clustering  $f_i$  describes which intervals of payoff player  $i$  clusters together; i.e., which payoffs  $x \neq y$  satisfy  $f_i(x) = f_i(y)$ , where this latter equality implies that  $f_i$  clusters together all payoffs in the interval between  $x$  and  $y$ .

Each clustering  $f_i$  induces a clustered utility  $f_i \circ \pi_i : S \rightarrow \mathbb{R}$  for player  $i$  that coarsens her original (unclustered) utility  $\pi_i$ . The coarse utility  $f_i \circ \pi_i$  is similar to the unclustered utility  $\pi_i$ , except that for some intervals of payoffs, the player clusters together all payoffs within the interval, and subjectively considers them as equivalent payoffs. Observe that  $\pi_i(y) = \pi_i(x) \Rightarrow (f_i \circ \pi_i)(y) = (f_i \circ \pi_i)(x)$ , and  $\pi_i(y) > \pi_i(x) \Rightarrow (f_i \circ \pi_i)(y) \geq (f_i \circ \pi_i)(x)$ . **The concavity of  $\pi_i$  implies that the coarse utility  $f_i \circ \pi_i$  is quasiconcave. Furthermore, coarsening a player's utility expands her best response correspondence.**

Intervals of payoffs that are clustered together allow the player to expand her best-reply sets. By contrast, the strictly monotone parts of the clustering do not have any effect on the player's best response correspondence. As a result, the only aspects of the clustering that affect the player's preferences are the intervals of payoffs that are clustered together. That is, if  $f_i$  and  $g_i$  are two clusterings with the same clustered intervals, i.e.,  $f_i(x) = f_i(y) \Leftrightarrow g_i(x) = g_i(y)$ , then they both induce the same clustered preferences: i.e.,  $f_i(\pi_i(s)) \geq f_i(\pi_i(s')) \Leftrightarrow g_i(\pi_i(s)) \geq g_i(\pi_i(s'))$ .

A common class of clusterings used in this paper involves players clustering payoffs iff they fall within a given interval. It will be useful to introduce a notation for this frequently-used class. For each interval  $[a, b] \subseteq \mathbb{R}$ , let  $f_i^{[a,b]}$  be a coarse utility that clusters together payoffs in the interval  $[a, b]$ , and does not cluster payoffs outside  $[a, b]$ , i.e.,

$$f_i^{[a,b]}(x) := \begin{cases} x & x \notin [a, b] \\ a & x \in [a, b]. \end{cases}$$

In particular,  $f_i^{\mathbb{R}} \equiv 0$  is the coarsest clustering that clusters all the payoffs together,  $f_i^{\emptyset} \equiv Id_i$  is the identity clustering that does not cluster any payoffs together, and  $f_i^{\geq c} := f_i^{[c, \infty)}$  clusters all payoffs above  $c$  together (i.e., players are satisficing, with an aspiration level of  $c$ ).

Given an underlying game  $G = (S, \pi)$  and a clustering profile  $f = (f_1, f_2)$ , let the *coarse-utility game*  $G_f = (S, f \circ \pi)$  be the game in which the utility of each player  $i$  is  $f_i \circ \pi_i$  (rather than the unclustered utility  $\pi_i$ ). Let  $NE(G_f)$  denote all Nash equilibria of  $G_f$ . It is easy to see that every Nash equilibrium of the underlying game  $G$  is a Nash equilibrium of the coarse-utility game  $G_f$ . Formally:

**Proposition 1.**  $NE(G) \subseteq NE(G_f)$  for each underlying game  $G$  and each profile  $f$ .

*Proof.* If  $s \in NE(G)$  then for any strategy  $s'_i \in S_i$ ,  $\pi_i(s) \geq \pi_i(s'_i, s_{-i})$ . Since  $f_i$  is weakly increasing, it follows that  $f_i \circ \pi_i(s) \geq f_i \circ \pi_i(s'_i, s_{-i})$ . Thus,  $s \in NE(G_f)$ , as desired.  $\square$

**Weak and Strong Coarse-Utility Equilibrium (CUE)** Our solution concept is a pair consisting of a coarse-utility profile and a strategy profile such that: (1) each strategy is a clustered best reply to the opponent's strategies, given the player's clustering, and (2) each clustering is a best reply to the opponent's clustering, in the sense that deviating to a different clustering would lead to an equilibrium of the new coarse-utility game induced by this deviation in which the deviator is outperformed (relative to the deviator's unclustered payoff in the original equilibrium).

The fact that coarse-utility games typically admit multiple equilibria means that there are several ways to formalize the second condition. We consider three variants of our basic solution concept. In the first variant, weak coarse-utility equilibrium, "best reply" is taken to mean that the deviator must be outperformed in at least one equilibrium in the new coarse-utility game.<sup>4</sup> Formally,

**Definition 1.** A *weak CUE* is a pair  $(f, s)$ , where  $f$  is a clustering profile and  $s$  is a strategy profile satisfying: (1)  $s \in NE(G_f)$ , and (2) for each player  $i$  and each clustering  $f'_i$ , there exists an equilibrium  $s' \in NE(G_{(f'_i, f_{-i})})$  such that  $\pi_i(s') \leq \pi_i(s)$ .

*Remark 1.* Our definition assumes that after a player deviates to a different clustering, the selected equilibrium is the worst possible for the deviator. This selection might arise from

---

<sup>4</sup>We assume that players always choose pure clusterings.

cultural, contractual, legal, or institutional norms, similar to the reasoning behind subgame-perfect equilibrium. Another interpretation relates to strategic risk aversion: a deviation leads to a lottery over potential equilibria, and a highly risk-averse player would only prefer this lottery if they are better off even in the worst possible equilibrium. In our subsequent definitions (strong CUE and CUE) this extreme attitude to strategic risk will be relaxed.

The following example shows that the notion of weak CUE is too permissive, in the sense that it allows unreasonable behavior after a player changes her coarse utility.

**Example 1** (Implausible weak CUE). Consider a symmetric Cournot game with linear demand  $G = (S, \pi)$ :  $S_i = [0, 1]$  and  $\pi_i(s_i, s_{-i}) = s_i \cdot (1 - s_i - s_{-i})$  for each player  $i$  (where  $s_i$  is interpreted as the quantity chosen by firm  $i$ , the price of both goods is determined by the linear inverse demand function  $p = 1 - s_i - s_{-i}$ , and the marginal cost of each firm is normalized to be zero). Then  $((f_1^{\mathbb{R}}, f_2^{\mathbb{R}}), (0.5, 0))$  is a weak CUE in which both players cluster all payoffs together, player 1 plays 0.5 and gains the maximal feasible payoff of 0.25 and player 2 plays 0 and gets zero payoff. If player 2 deviates to another clustering, then player 1 (who is indifferent between all strategies) “floods” the market with quantity 1, which yields a non-positive payoff to both players. The reaction of player 1 to the new clustering of player 2 seems implausible in the sense that her CUE quantity 0.5 is a clustered best reply to all of her opponent’s strategy; she has no reason to increase her quantity to 1.

The notion of weak CUE is equivalent to a subgame-perfect equilibrium of a two-stage game in which in the first stage each player chooses a clustering for her second-stage self, and in the second stage each second-stage self chooses an action. Example 1 suggests that including the player’s off-the-equilibrium-path behavior after each clustering profile as part of the player’s strategy is too permissive in our setup. This is so because subgame-perfect equilibrium behavior allows a player with the coarsest utility to use an extreme punishment that minimizes the opponent’s payoff in response to any change in the opponent’s utility.<sup>5</sup>

We next define a more restrictive equilibrium notion, strong CUE, which requires that a deviator who chooses a different coarse utility is outperformed in *all* equilibria of the induced coarse-utility game. Formally:

**Definition 2.** A *strong CUE* is a pair  $(f, s)$ , where  $f$  is a clustering profile and  $s$  is a strategy profile satisfying: (1)  $s \in NE(G_f)$ , and (2)  $\pi_i(s') \leq \pi_i(s)$  for each player  $i$ , each clustering  $f'_i$ , and each equilibrium  $s' \in NE(G_{(f'_i, f_{-i})})$ .

<sup>5</sup>Another reason for not defining a player’s strategy to include behavior after off-the-equilibrium-path clustering profiles is that such a strategy would be very complicated, and there is no reason to believe that a learning process would induce a large set of off-the-equilibrium-path pre-specified behaviors.

|       | $a_2$ | $b_2$ |
|-------|-------|-------|
| $a_1$ | 2, 1  | 0, 0  |
| $b_1$ | 0, 0  | 1, 2  |

Table 2: Payoff Matrix of Battle of the Sexes Game

The fact that no strategy profile Pareto dominates both Nash equilibria  $((a_1, a_2)$  and  $(b_1, b_2)$ ) implies (due to Claim 2) that the game does not admit any strong CUE.

*Remark 2.* Observe that a strategy profile remains an equilibrium of a coarse-utility game if we coarsen the clustering of one of the players. Thus, if  $s' \in NE\left(G_{(f'_i, f_{-i})}\right)$ , then  $s' \in NE\left(G_{(f_i^{\mathbb{R}}, f_{-i})}\right)$ . This implies that we can replace “each clustering  $f'_i$ ” with: (1) “the most refined clustering  $f_i^{\emptyset}$ ” in Definition 1, and (2) “the coarsest clustering  $f_i^{\mathbb{R}}$ ” in Definition 2.

Next we show that any strong CUE must Pareto dominate every Nash equilibrium of the game. This suggests that the notion of strong CUE is too restrictive, because in many games, such as the Battle of Sexes (see Table 2), no strategy profile Pareto dominates all Nash equilibria (and, thus, many games do not admit strong CUEs).

**Proposition 2.** *Let  $(f, s)$  be a strong CUE, and let  $s^{NE}$  be a Nash equilibrium. Then  $\pi_i(s) \geq \pi_i(s^{NE})$  for all players  $i$ .*

*Proof.* Assume to the contrary that  $\pi_i(s) < \pi_i(s^{NE})$ . Consider a deviation by player  $i$  to an arbitrary clustering  $f'_i$ . Proposition 1 implies that  $s^{NE} \in NE\left(G_{(f'_i, f_{-i})}\right)$ , which contradicts  $(f, s)$  being a strong CUE.  $\square$

**Plausible Equilibria and CUE** The third equilibrium notion we consider lies between weak CUE and strong CUE; we believe it is the most appropriate equilibrium notion. To define it, we first need to define which equilibria are likely to emerge after a player deviates to a new clustering. We assume that the strategy profile played in the CUE is focal, and that each player will change her behavior with respect to this focal profile only if this change increases her clustered payoff. An equilibrium of the new coarse-utility game is *plausible* if it can be reached by a sequence of deviations (starting from the focal strategy profile  $s$ ) such that each deviation improves the deviator’s clustered payoff.

**Definition 3.** Fix a strategy profile  $s$  and a clustering profile  $f$ . Equilibrium  $s' \in NE(G_f)$  is *plausible* with respect to  $s$  if there is a sequence  $(s^k)_{k \geq 0}$  of strategy profiles satisfying: (1)  $s^0 = s$ , (2)  $\lim_{k \rightarrow \infty} s^k = s'$ , and (3) if  $s_i^{k+1} \neq s_i^k$ , then  $f_i(\pi_i(s_i^{k+1}, s_{-i}^k)) \geq f_i(\pi_i(\alpha \cdot s_i^k + (1 - \alpha) \cdot s_i^{k+1}, s_{-i}^k))$  for any  $\alpha \in [0, 1]$  with a strict inequality for  $\alpha = 1$ . We refer to such a sequence  $(s^k)_{k \geq 0}$  as an *improvement path*.

An improvement path is *trivial* if  $s^k = s^0$  for each  $k$ . Observe that condition (3) prevents a deviating agent to overshooting her clustered best reply, as such overshooting seems implausible. If deviating from strategy  $s_i$  to  $s'_i$  improves player  $i$ 's clustered payoff, there is no reason for Player  $i$  to further increase her deviation to  $s''_i$ , if this would reduce her clustered payoff compared to  $s'_i$ .

Let  $PNE(G_f, s)$  be the set of plausible equilibria with respect to  $s$ . A CUE refines the notion of is a weak CUE by further requiring that a player who deviates to a different clustering will be outperformed in each plausible equilibrium of the new coarse-utility game.

**Definition 4.** A coarse-utility equilibrium (*CUE*) is a weak CUE  $(f, s)$  that satisfies:  $\pi_i(s') \leq \pi_i(s)$  for each player  $i$ , each clustering  $f'_i$ , and each plausible equilibrium  $s' \in PNE\left(G_{(f'_i, f_{-i})}, s\right)$ .

**Example 1** (revisited). The implausible weak CUE in Example 1 is not a CUE. If player 2 changes her clustering to  $f_2^\emptyset \equiv Id_2$ , the unique plausible equilibrium of the induced coarse-utility game  $G_{(f_1^{\mathbb{R}}, f_2^\emptyset)}$  is  $(0.5, 0.25)$ , giving player 2 a positive payoff. This contradicts the assumption that  $((f_1^{\mathbb{R}}, f_2^{\mathbb{R}}), (0.5, 0))$  with  $\pi_2(0.5, 0) = 0$  is a CUE.

We require a CUE to be weak CUE rather than defining it as a pair  $(f, s)$  where every deviator is outperformed in any plausible equilibrium, to address cases where  $PNE(G_f, s)$  might be empty. Our focus on plausible equilibria (whenever they exist) in the definition of CUE has a similar motivation to that of the restriction to focal equilibria (whenever they exist) in the definition of stable configurations given by Dekel et al. (2007).

Strategy profile  $s$  is a *CUE outcome* (resp., *weak CUE outcome*, *strong CUE outcome*) if there exists a clustering profile  $f$  such that  $(f, s)$  is a CUE (resp., weak CUE, strong CUE). The following simple observation shows that every Nash equilibrium is a CUE outcome with respect to every clustering profile. This implies that every game admits a CUE outcome.

**Proposition 3.** Let  $s^{NE}$  be a Nash equilibrium of the underlying game. Then  $(f, s^{NE})$  is a CUE for every clustering profile  $f$ .

*Proof.* Fix any clustering profile  $f$ . Assume to the contrary that  $(f, s^{NE})$  is not a CUE. Observe that  $s^{NE} \in PNE\left(G_{(f'_i, f_{-i})}, s\right)$  for every player  $i$  and clustering  $f'_i$  with respect to the constant improvement path  $(s^k)_{k \geq 0} = (s^{NE}, s^{NE}, \dots)$ . The fact that  $PNE\left(G_{(f'_i, f_{-i})}, s\right)$  is non-empty implies that there is a player  $i$ , a clustering  $f'_i$  and a strategy  $s' \neq s^{NE}$ , such that  $s' \in PNE\left(G_{(f'_i, f_{-i})}, s^{NE}\right)$  with respect to an improvement path  $(s^k)_{k \geq 0}$  and  $\pi_i(s') > \pi_i(s)$ . Let  $s^{k_0}$  be the first element in the improvement path that is not equal to  $s^{NE}$ . The definition of an improvement path implies that  $f_i\left(\pi_i\left(s_i^{k_0}, s_{-i}^{k_0-1}\right)\right) = f_i\left(\pi_i\left(s_i^{k_0}, s_{-i}^{NE}\right)\right) > f_i\left(\pi_i\left(s_i^{NE}, s_{-i}^{NE}\right)\right)$ , which contradicts  $S^{NE}$  being a Nash equilibrium.  $\square$

In Appendix B, we extend our model and results to partial observability, where each player privately observes her opponent’s clustering with probability  $p \in [0, 1]$ . Specifically, we show that all of our results hold for a sufficiently high probability  $p < 1$  of observing a deviation of the opponent to a different clustering. By contrast, if the observation probability is close to zero, then clustering can only induce Nash equilibria (see Proposition 12).

**Evolutionary/Learning Interpretation of CUE** We think of CUE as a reduced-form solution concept capturing the essential features of an evolutionary process of social learning in which an agent’s coarse utility determines her behavior, the induced behavior determines the agent’s success, and success regulates the evolution of coarse utilities (in line with the indirect evolutionary approach, discussed in Section 1.1). In what follows, we informally present our evolutionary interpretation. In the process, we also motivate our assumption that players’ clusterings are observable.

Consider two large populations of agents: agents who play the role of player 1 and agents who play the role of player 2. In each round, agents from each population are randomly matched to play the underlying game against opponents from the other population. Each agent in each population is endowed with a coarse utility, and the agents play a Nash equilibrium of the game induced by their coarse utilities. Assume that initially all agents in each population have the same coarse utility.

With small probability, a few agents (mutants) in one of the populations (say, population 1) may be endowed with a different coarse utility due to a random error or experimentation. We assume that agents of population 2 observe whether their opponents are mutants (possibly due to pre-play cheap talk), and that the agents of population 2 and the mutants of population 1 gradually adapt their play, converging to a (plausible) equilibrium of the new clustered game (this gradual process corresponds to an improvement path in Definition 3).

The assumption of being able to observe mutants with different coarse utility can be justified either by (1) having pre-play cheap talk, in which having different coarse utility induces the mutants to communicate differently, or (2) assuming that changes in coarse utility are much slower than changes in the players’ behavior, which allows a slow process in which players learn to identify the presence of mutants with a new coarse utility and a faster process in which they adjust their behavior when being matched with these mutants. Finally, we assume that the total success (fitness) of agents is monotonically influenced by their (unclustered) payoff in the underlying game, and that there is a slow process in which the composition of the population evolves.

This slow process might be the result of a slow flow of new agents who join the population. Each new agent randomly chooses one of the incumbents in his own population as a “mentor”

(and mimics the mentor’s coarse utility), where the probabilities are such that agents with higher fitness are more likely to be chosen as mentors. If the original population state is not a CUE, then there are mutants who outperform the remaining incumbents in their own population, which in turn implies that the original population state is not stable, as new agents are likely to mimic more successful mutants. By contrast, if the original population state is a CUE, then for any mutant there is a new plausible equilibrium in which the mutants are weakly outperformed relative to the incumbents of their own population; this allows the CUE to remain stable. As shown in Appendix B, the same arguments also work in setups with partial observability, as long as the probability of observing mutants with different coarse utility is sufficiently high.

### 3 Results

In this section we present various results that characterize weak CUE, CUE, and strong CUE outcomes in various classes of games.

#### 3.1 A Folk Theorem for Weak CUE Outcomes

Coarse utility allows a limited form of commitment, relative to the existing literature on the indirect evolutionary approach and on delegation, in the sense that it allows a player to be indifferent only between payoffs in an interval. Nevertheless, our next result shows that a “folk-theorem” result holds in our setup with respect to weak CUE outcomes. Specifically, we show that any individually rational profile is a weak CUE outcome.

Before presenting the result, we formally define the maximin (and minimax) payoff and individual rationality. The maximin (resp., minimax) value of player  $i$ ,  $\underline{M}_i$  (resp.,  $\overline{M}_i$ ), is the highest payoff player  $i$  can guarantee herself without knowing (resp., when knowing) her opponent’s strategy. Formally,

$$\underline{M}_i = \max_{s_i \in S_i} \min_{s_{-i} \in S_{-i}} \pi_i(s_i, s_{-i}), \quad \overline{M}_i = \min_{s_{-i} \in S_{-i}} \max_{s_i \in S_i} \pi_i(s_i, s_{-i}).$$

It is immediate that  $\underline{M}_i \leq \overline{M}_i$ . Von Neumann’s Minimax theorem implies that the two values coincide if each player’s payoff is weakly convex in the opponent’s strategy.

A strategy profile is weakly (strongly) individually rational if it yields each agent a payoff weakly higher than her maximin (minimax) payoff  $M_i$ . Formally,

**Definition 5.** A strategy profile  $s \in S$  is weakly (resp., strongly) individually rational if  $\pi_i(s) \geq \underline{M}_i$  (resp.,  $\pi_i(s) \geq \overline{M}_i$ ) for each player  $i$ .

Proposition 4 presents a “folk-theorem” (i.e., a general feasibility theorem) for weak CUE outcomes. Specifically, it shows that (1) any strongly individually rational profile is a weak CUE outcome, and (2) any weak CUE outcome is individually rational.

**Proposition 4.** *Let  $s$  be a strategy profile.*

1. *If  $s$  is a weak CUE outcome, then  $s$  is individually rational.*
2. *If  $s$  is strongly individually rational, then  $s$  is a weak CUE outcome.*

*Proof.* [Sketch] Part (1) holds because if a profile is not individually rational, a player can deviate to not clustering any payoffs, and obtain an unclustered payoff of at least  $\underline{M}_i$ . Part (2) holds because any strongly individually rational profile can be supported by both players clustering all payoffs together, and by punishing deviations by the opponent playing the strategy that is most harmful to the deviator.

We defer the formal details of the proof to Appendix A.1. □

### 3.2 Stackelberg Equilibria and CUE Outcomes

In this subsection we study the relations between CUE outcomes and equilibria of a sequential (Stackelberg leader) variant of the game.

We start by showing that every Pareto-efficient profile is a strong CUE outcome, provided that no player can gain by becoming a Stackelberg leader. Formally,

**Proposition 5.** *Let  $s$  be a strategy profile that satisfies the following conditions:*

1. *Pareto efficiency: if  $\pi_i(s') > \pi_i(s)$ , then  $\pi_{-i}(s') < \pi_{-i}(s) \forall s' \in S$ ; and*
2. *robustness to Stackelberg-leaders: if  $s'_{-i} \in BR_{-i}(s'_i)$ , then  $\pi_i(s') \leq \pi_i(s) \forall s' \in S$ .*

*Then  $s$  is a strong CUE outcome.*

*Proof.* [sketch] Profile  $s$  is supported as a strong CUE by each player clustering together all payoffs above her CUE payoff. This clustering implies that if a player deviates, her opponent in any equilibrium of the new clustered game either obtains at least her CUE payoff or she plays the best reply to her unclustered utility. In the first (resp., second) case, condition 1 (resp., 2) implies that the deviator cannot gain. See Appendix A.2 for details. □

**Example 2.** We revisit the symmetric Cournot game of Example 1:  $S_i = [0, 1]$  and  $\pi_i(s_i, s_{-i}) = s_i \cdot (1 - s_i - s_{-i})$ . Proposition 5 implies that the efficient profile (0.25, 0.25), in which the players equally share the monopoly quantity, is a strong CUE outcome. Observe



that this profile, which induces each player a payoff of  $\frac{1}{8}$ , is robust to Stackelberg leaders, because a Stackelberg leader can obtain a payoff of at most  $\frac{1}{8}$  (by the leader playing 0.5, and her opponent best replying by choosing 0.25).

We next show that any equilibrium of the sequential “Stackelberg-leader” variant of the underlying game is a CUE outcome.

We say that profile  $s$  is a Stackelberg equilibrium if it is the equilibrium outcome of a sequential variant of the game, in which one of the players (the Stackelberg leader) plays first, and her opponent observes the leader’s strategy and best replies to it. Formally,

**Definition 6.** Strategy profile  $s$  is a *Stackelberg-equilibrium* of the underlying game  $G$  if there exists a player  $i$  (the leader) such that:

1. the opponent best replies to the leader:  $s_{-i} \in BR_{-i}(s_i)$ , and
2. the leader cannot achieve a higher payoff by deviating:  $\pi_i(s') \leq \pi_i(s)$  for all profiles  $s'$  for which  $s'_{-i} \in BR_{-i}(s'_i)$ .

Our next result shows that every Stackelberg equilibrium is a CUE outcome that is supported by the leader (resp., follower) clustering together all (no) payoffs. We defer the simple proof to Appendix [A.3](#).

**Proposition 6.** *Let  $s$  be a Stackelberg-equilibrium with player  $i$  as the leader. Then  $((f_i^{\mathbb{R}}, f_{-i}^{\emptyset}), s)$  is a CUE.*

**Example 3.** We revisit the symmetric Cournot game of Example [1](#) yet again. Recall that  $S_i = [0, 1]$ ,  $\pi_i(s_i, s_{-i}) = s_i \cdot (1 - s_i - s_{-i})$ . It is well known that  $(0.5, 0.25)$  is the Stackelberg equilibrium of the game in which player 1 is the leader and chooses her quantity first. Proposition [6](#) implies that  $(0.5, 0.25)$  is a CUE outcome. By clustering all of her payoffs together, player 1 commits to keeping playing 0.5 (as it is always a clustered best reply). Player 2, who cannot gain anything from clustering, plays her unclustered best reply 0.25.

### 3.3 Constant-Sum and Common-Interest Games

In this section, we show a close connection between Nash equilibria and CUE outcomes in both constant-sum games and common-interest games.

An underlying game is constant sum if the sum of payoffs is a constant. Formally:

**Definition 7.** An underlying game  $G = (S, \pi)$  is *constant sum* if  $\pi_1(s) + \pi_2(s) = \pi_1(s') + \pi_2(s') \quad \forall s, s' \in S$ .

Recall that all Nash equilibria of a constant-sum game yield each player her minimax (=maximin) payoff, that is,  $s \in NE(G)$  implies that  $\pi_i(s) = M_i \equiv \underline{M}_i = \overline{M}_i$ . Observe that the constant sum of payoffs must be equal to the sum of the minimax payoffs, that is,  $\pi_1(s) + \pi_2(s) = M_1 + M_2$  for any profile  $s$ . Further observe that clustering might affect the constant-sum property. That is, the coarse-utility game  $G_f$  might not be a constant-sum game.

Next we show that (1) every Nash equilibrium of the underlying constant-sum game is a strong CUE, and (2) every weak CUE outcome provides each player an unclustered payoff that is equal to the game's value.

**Proposition 7.** *If the underlying game  $G$  is constant-sum, then*

- (a) *every Nash equilibrium of  $G$  is a strong CUE outcome;*
- (b) *every weak CUE yields each player  $i$  an unclustered payoff of  $M_i$ .*

The relatively straightforward proof of Proposition 7 can be found in Appendix A.4.

Next we show that the close connection between Nash equilibria and CUE outcomes holds in the class of games in which all players have common interests, in the sense that their payoffs are always equal.

**Definition 8.** A game has *common interests* if  $\pi_i(s) = \pi_{-i}(s)$  for each  $s \in S$ .

A strategy profile is *Pareto-dominant* if it maximizes the payoffs of all players, that is,  $s$  is a Pareto-dominant profile if  $\pi_i(s) \geq \pi_i(s')$  for each player  $i$  and profile  $s'$ . Observe that a common-interest game admits at least one Pareto-dominant strategy profile, which must be a Nash equilibrium.

Our next result shows that the set of CUE outcomes coincides with the set of Nash equilibria in finite games, and that the set of strong CUE outcomes coincides with the set of Pareto-dominant Nash equilibria.

**Proposition 8.** *If the underlying game  $G$  has common interests, then*

- (a) *If  $G$  is finite, then  $s$  is a CUE outcome iff it is a Nash equilibrium of  $G$ ;*
- (b)  *$s$  is a strong CUE outcome iff it is a Pareto-dominant Nash equilibrium of  $G$ .*

The proof of Proposition 8 can be found in Appendix A.5.

## 4 CUE in Interval Games

In the previous section, we characterized CUE outcomes in which both players play their unclustered best replies (i.e., Nash equilibria) and CUE in which one of the players plays her unclustered best reply (i.e., Stackelberg-like equilibria). Arguably, the most interesting CUE outcomes (which introduce new kinds of behavior) are the remaining set of CUE outcomes, in which neither player plays her unclustered best reply. In this section, we characterize this class of CUE outcomes under the widely applied assumption that the game has monotone externalities. Specifically, we show that in all these CUE, both players deviate from best replying in the direction that is beneficial to the opponent. One can interpret this result as showing that by committing to a coarse utility the player commits to a favorable action vis-à-vis their co-player.

### 4.1 Games with Monotone Externalities

An interval game has monotone externalities if increasing one's strategy always affects the opponent's payoff in the same direction: either positive externalities (increasing one's strategy increases the opponent's payoff), or negative externalities (increasing one's strategy decreases the opponent's payoff). Formally,

**Definition 9.** An interval game  $G = (S, \pi)$  has *monotone externalities* if either:

1. *Positive externalities:*  $\pi_i(s_i, s_{-i}) > \pi_i(s_i, s'_{-i})$  for each player  $i$ , each strategy  $s_i$ , and each pair of strategies satisfying  $s_{-i} > s'_{-i}$ .
2. *Negative externalities:*  $\pi_i(s_i, s_{-i}) < \pi_i(s_i, s'_{-i})$  for each player  $i$ , each strategy  $s_i$ , and each pair of strategies satisfying  $s_{-i} > s'_{-i}$ .

Games with monotone externalities are common in the economic literature (e.g., Cournot competition, Bertrand competition with differentiated goods, Tullock competition, public good games, etc.).

We say that  $s_i$  is *externalities-higher* than  $s'_i$  (or, equivalently, that  $s'_i$  is *externalities-lower* than  $s_i$ ), and denote it by  $s_i \succ_{-i} s'_i$ , if the opponent gains by player  $i$  changing her strategy from  $s'_i$  to  $s_i$ . Formally

**Definition 10.** Let  $s_i, s'_i \in S_i$  be two strategies in a game with monotone externalities. We write  $s_i \succ_{-i} s'_i$  (resp.,  $s_i \succeq_{-i} s'_i$ ) if

1. the game has positive externalities and  $s_i > s'_i$  (resp.,  $s_i \geq s'_i$ ); or
2. the game has negative externalities and  $s_i < s'_i$  (resp.,  $s_i \leq s'_i$ ).

Theorem 1 characterizes the CUE outcomes in which neither player plays her unclustered best reply. It shows that in all such CUE outcomes:

1. each player’s CUE behavior treats her opponent better than unclustered best reply behavior would do; and
2. any externalities-lower profile cannot Pareto dominate the CUE outcome, and if it improves the unclustered payoff of one of the players then the opponent cannot be playing an unclustered best reply. (We interpret this latter condition as requiring that no player can gain by becoming a Stackelberg leader and deviating to an externalities-lower strategy.)

**Theorem 1.** *Let  $G$  be an interval game with monotone externalities. Let  $s$  be an interior CUE outcome in which  $s_i \notin BR_i(s_{-i})$  for each player  $i$ . Then:*

1.  $s_i \succ_{-i} BR_i(s_{-i})$  for each player  $i$ ;
2. if  $s'_i \preceq_{-i} s_i$ ,  $s'_{-i} \preceq_i s_{-i}$ , and either (a)  $\pi_{-i}(s') \geq \pi_{-i}(s)$  or (b)  $s'_{-i} \in BR_{-i}(s'_i)$ , then  $\pi_i(s') \leq \pi_i(s)$ .

*Proof.* [Sketch] For part (1), assume to the contrary that  $s_i \prec_{-i} BR_i(s_{-i})$ . Consider a sufficiently small deviation of player  $-i$  toward her unclustered best reply (which can be implemented by slightly altering her clustering). Any payoff-improving reaction of player  $i$  must be toward player  $i$ ’s best reply, which is the direction that is beneficial to player  $-i$  due to monotone externalities. Thus, player  $-i$  gains from the deviation and  $s$  cannot be a CUE outcome. This proves part (1). In order to prove part (2), assume to the contrary that there exists a strategy profile  $s'$  that violates condition (2). One can show that player  $i$  can change her clustering and improve her clustered payoff by changing her strategy to  $s'_i$ ; this is followed by at most one additional stage in the improvement path resulting in the plausible equilibrium  $s'$ , which violates  $s$  being a CUE outcome.

The details of the proof are in Appendix A.6. □

*Remark 3.* Theorem 1 shows that CUE yields results that are qualitatively different from most existing related solution concepts (e.g., [subjective preferences \(Heifetz et al., 2007a\)](#), [delegation \(Fershtman and Judd, 1987\)](#), [biased beliefs \(Heller and Winter, 2020\)](#), and [naive analytics \(Berman and Heller, 2021\)](#)). All these existing solution concepts predict that players treat their opponents worse than they would using their unclustered best replies in games with strategic substitutes. By contrast, we have the opposite prediction in all CUEs in which neither player plays her unclustered best reply. The key difference between our result and theirs is induced by two novel aspects of our solution concept:

1. CUE allows the subjective (clustered) payoffs to differ from the material (unclustered) ones only by clustering payoffs in an interval. This implies that the direction that improves one's subjective payoffs is the same direction that improves her material payoffs, which is the driving force behind Theorem 1. By contrast, the existing solution concepts allow the subjective preferences to substantially differ from the material ones, which allows an agent's deviation to increase her subjective payoff while decreasing her material payoff.
2. Most other solution concepts imply that a player with strictly concave material payoffs have a unique subjective best reply, which is a key argument in ruling out equilibrium behavior in which players treat their opponents better than they would using their material best replies in games with strategic substitutes. By contrast, CUE induces players to be indifferent between an interval of subjective best-reply strategies, which allows the players to treat their opponents better than they would using their unclustered best replies.

## 4.2 Games with Strategic Complements

In this subsection, we study games with strategic complements, and show that for these games, the two conditions of Theorem 1 fully characterize CUE outcomes; that is, they provide both necessary and sufficient conditions for CUE outcomes.

A game  $G = (S, \pi)$  has *strategic complements* if  $\frac{\partial \pi_i(s)}{\partial s_i}$  is strictly increasing in  $s_{-i}$  for each player  $i$  and each strategy  $s_i$ . Games with strategic complements are common in the economic literature, and include, in particular, price competition with differentiated goods (Example 4). It is well known that every game  $G$  with strategic complements and monotone externalities admits a *worst Nash equilibrium*  $s^{WNE} \in NE(G)$ , in which all players play their externalities-lowest equilibrium strategies, i.e.,  $s_i^{WNE} \preceq_{-i} s_i^{NE}$  for every Nash equilibrium  $s^{NE} \in NE(G)$  and player  $i \in I$  (see, e.g., Milgrom and Roberts, 1990). It is well-known that the worst Nash equilibrium is Pareto dominated by all other Nash equilibria of the game.

Theorem 2 characterizes the set of CUE outcomes in monotone games with strategic complements. It shows that the two necessary conditions for being a CUE outcome in an interval game with monotone externalities in Theorem 1 are also sufficient conditions if the game has strategic complements. This characterization implies, in particular, that all CUE outcomes have externalities-higher strategies and higher payoffs relative to the worst Nash equilibrium.

**Theorem 2.** *Let  $G$  be an interval game with monotone externalities and strategic complements. Let  $s$  be an interior strategy profile. Then  $s$  is a CUE outcome iff:*

1. either  $s_i \succ_{-i} BR_i(s_{-i})$  or  $s_i \in BR_i(s_{-i})$  for each player  $i$ ;
2. if  $s'_i \preceq_{-i} s_i$ ,  $s'_{-i} \preceq_i s_{-i}$ , and either (a)  $\pi_{-i}(s') \geq \pi_{-i}(s)$  or (b)  $s'_{-i} \in BR_{-i}(s'_i)$ , then  $\pi_i(s') \leq \pi_i(s)$ .

Moreover, profile  $s$  has externalities-higher strategies and higher payoffs than the worst Nash equilibrium (i.e.,  $s_i \succeq_{-i} s_i^{WNE}$  and  $\pi_i(s) \geq \pi_i(s^{WNE}) \forall i$ ).

*Proof.* [Sketch] For the “if” direction, we show that  $s$  can be supported as a CUE outcome if each player clusters all payoffs above her payoff in  $s$  (i.e., players satisfice with an aspiration level equal to the equilibrium payoff). Because the game has strategic complements, condition (1) implies that all the stages in an improvement path must be in the externalities-lower direction. Given the players’ clustering, the improvement path must end in either (a) a Pareto-dominant profile, or (b) a profile in which the non-deviating player plays her unclustered best reply. Condition (2) implies that the deviator cannot gain in either of these cases. For the “only if” direction, it is relatively simple to show that strategic complements allow us to extend the argument of Theorem 1 to cases in which one of the players plays her unclustered best reply.

For the claim in the final sentence of the theorem statement, note that the inequality  $s_i \succeq_{-i} BR_i(s_{-i})$  implies that  $s_i \succeq_{-i} s_i^{WNE}$  for each player  $i$  by a standard property of games with strategic complements (proved in Lemma 2). It remains to show that  $\pi_i(s) \geq \pi_i(s^{WNE})$  for each player  $i$ . Assume to the contrary that  $\pi_1(s) < \pi_1(s^{WNE})$ . We consider a deviation by player 1 to  $f_1^\emptyset$  (not clustering any payoffs together), followed by an improvement path in which the players sequentially decrease their strategies into best replying until they converge to a plausible equilibrium. One can show that strategic complements imply that player 1 obtains a payoff of at least  $\pi_1(s^{WNE}) > \pi_1(s)$  in this plausible equilibrium, which contradicts the fact that  $s$  is a CUE outcome.

The details of the proof are in Appendix A.7. □

Next, we apply Theorem 2 to price competition with differentiated goods (the linear city model à la Hotelling). Specifically, we show that in all CUE outcomes both players choose prices and obtain payoffs at least as high as in the unique Nash equilibrium.

**Example 4** (Price competition with differentiated goods; adapted from Mas-Colell et al., 1995, Example 12.C.2 with parameters  $t = 1$  and  $M = 3$ ). Consider a mass one of consumers uniformly distributed in the interval  $[0, 1]$ . Consider two firms that produce widgets, located at the two extreme locations: 0 and 1. Every consumer wants one widget. Producing a widget has a constant marginal cost, which we normalize to be zero. Each firm  $i$  chooses price  $s_i \in [0, 3]$  for its widgets. The total cost of buying a widget from firm  $i$  is equal to its

price  $s_i$  plus the consumer's distance from the firm. Each buyer buys a widget from the firm with the lower total buying cost. This implies that the total demand for widget  $i$  is given by function  $q_i(s_i, s_{-i})$ , where

$$q_i(s_i, s_{-i}) = \begin{cases} 0 & s_i - s_{-i} \geq 1, \\ \frac{s_{-i} - s_i + 1}{2} & -1 < s_i - s_{-i} < 1, \\ 1 & s_i - s_{-i} \leq -1. \end{cases}$$

The payoff (profit) of firm  $i$  is given by  $\pi_i(s) = s_i \cdot q_i(s)$ . Observe that no strategy profile  $s$  is Pareto dominated by a lower profile  $s' < s$ . This is because  $s'_i \cdot q_i(s') = \pi_i(s') \geq \pi_i(s) = s_i \cdot q_i(s) \Rightarrow q_i(s') \geq q_i(s)$ , and, similarly,  $\pi_i(s') > \pi_i(s) \Rightarrow q_i(s') > q_i(s)$ . Thus, if  $s'$  Pareto dominates  $s$ , then  $q_i(s') \geq q_i(s)$  and  $q_{-i}(s') \geq q_{-i}(s)$  where at least one of these inequalities must be strict, a contradiction.

It is well-known that the game has strategic complements, and that each player has a unique best reply for each opponent's strategy, which is given by  $BR_i(s_{-i}) = \frac{s_{-i} + 1}{2}$ . This implies that both players play weakly above their unclustered best-replies iff  $s_1 \geq \frac{s_2 + 1}{2}$  and  $s_2 \geq \frac{s_1 + 1}{2} \Leftrightarrow s_1 \in \left[ \frac{s_2 + 1}{2}, 2s_2 - 1 \right]$  (which implies, in particular, that  $s_1, s_2 \geq 1$ ).

Observe that the payoff of player  $i$  when playing strategy  $s_i$  and facing a best-replying opponent is given by  $\pi_i(s_i, BR_{-i}(s_i)) = \frac{s_i(3-s_i)}{4}$ . Thus,  $\pi_i(s_i, BR_{-i}(s_i))$  is a strictly concave function of  $s_i$  with a unique maximal profit of  $\frac{9}{16}$  at  $s_i = 1.5$ . This implies that profile  $s$  is robust to (externalities-)lower Stackelberg-leaders iff, for each player  $i$ , either (1)  $s_i \geq 1.5$  and  $\pi_i(s) \geq \frac{9}{16}$ , or (2)  $s_i < 1.5$  and  $s_{-i} > BR_{-i}(s_i)$ . By combining these inequalities with Theorem 2, we get that a strategy profile  $s$  is a CUE outcome iff

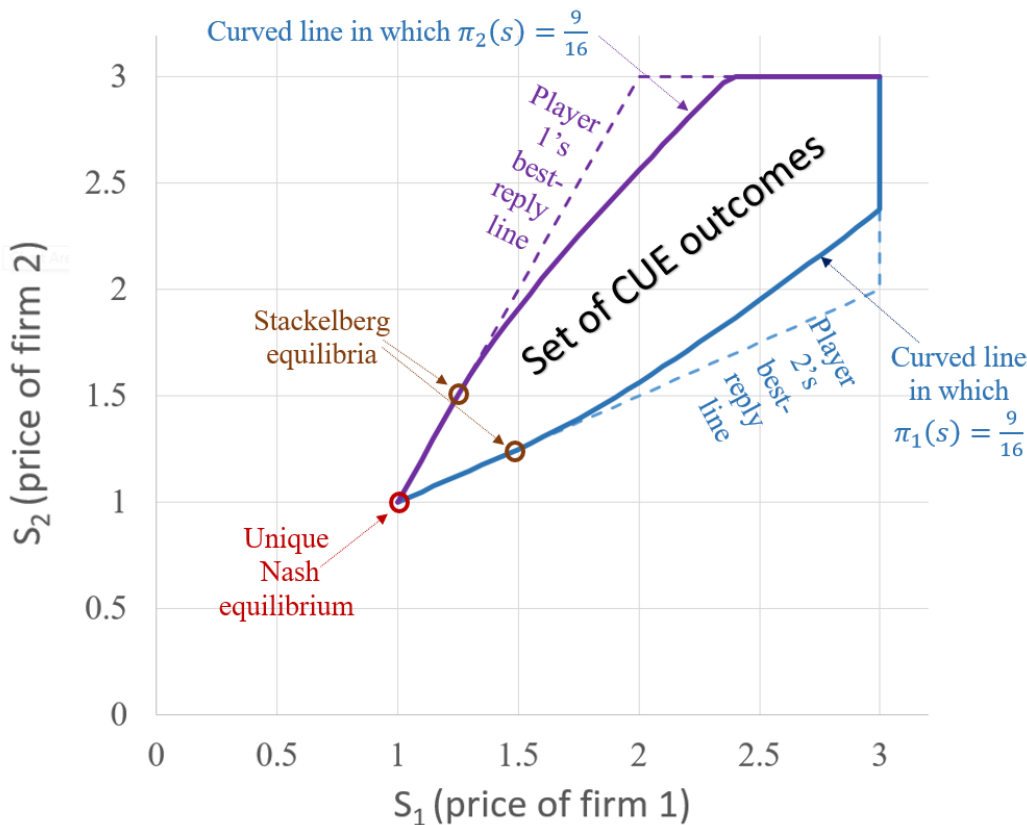
1. Each strategy is higher than the unclustered best reply:  $s_1 \in \left[ \frac{s_2 + 1}{2}, 2s_2 - 1 \right]$ ; and
2. if  $s_i \geq 1.5$ , then player  $i$ 's unclustered payoff is further required to be above  $\frac{9}{16}$  (her payoff if she were a Stackelberg leader).

Figure 1 illustrates the set of CUE outcomes. In all the CUE both players set higher prices and obtain higher payoffs than in the Nash equilibrium. These two properties hold for any game with strategic complements and a unique Nash equilibrium (i.e., players choose externalities-higher strategies and get payoffs higher than the Nash equilibrium in all CUEs).

### 4.3 Games with Strategic Substitutes

A game  $G = (S, \pi)$  has *strategic substitutes* if  $\frac{\partial \pi_i(s)}{\partial s_i}$  is strictly decreasing in  $s_{-i}$  for each player  $i$  and each strategy  $s_i$ . Games with strategic complements are common in the economic literature, and include, in particular, Cournot competition (Example 5).

Figure 1: The Set of CUE Outcomes in Example 4



The set of CUE outcomes can be divided to two disjoint classes: (1) CUE outcomes in which at least one of the players plays her unclustered best reply, and (2) CUE outcomes in which neither player plays her unclustered best reply. Theorem 2 shows that in games with strategic complements, both classes induce similar behavior, which deviates from Nash behavior in the direction that is beneficial to the players. We now show that the two classes induce qualitatively different behaviors in games with strategic substitutes. Theorem 1 implies that in the second class of CUE outcomes both players deviate from unclustered best reply in the direction that is beneficial to the opponent.

By contrast, Theorem 3 shows that in the first class of CUE outcomes (in which at least one of the players plays her unclustered best reply), the non-best-replying player  $i$  deviates from her unclustered best reply in the direction that is harmful to the opponent. Hence the player that does not best reply uses the clustering as a threat rather than a commitment to a favorable action. Moreover, under the additional mild assumption of the payoff function being strictly (rather than only weakly) concave, there exists a Nash equilibrium in which player  $i$ 's CUE strategy is externalities-lower than her Nash equilibrium strategy (while the opposite holds for player  $-i$ ).



**Theorem 3.** *Let  $G$  be an interval game with monotone externalities and strategic substitutes. Let  $s$  be an interior CUE outcome. Assume that  $s_{-i} \in BR_{-i}(s_i)$ . Then:*

1. *either  $s_i \prec_{-i} BR_i(s_{-i})$  or  $s_i \in BR_i(s_{-i})$ .*
2. *If the payoff function is strictly concave in the player's own strategy, then there exists a Nash equilibrium  $s^{NE} \in NE(G)$ , such that  $s_i \preceq_{-i} s_i^{NE}$  and  $s_{-i} \succeq_i s_{-i}^{NE}$ .*

*Proof.* [Sketch]

1. Assume to the contrary that  $s_i \succ BR_i(s_{-i})$ . Let  $s'_i \prec_{-i} s_i$  be a nearby externality-lower strategy. Player  $i$  can increase her unclustered payoff by deviating to clustering all payoffs above  $\pi_i(s'_i, s_{-i})$ . This deviation induces an improvement path in which player  $i$  increases her unclustered payoff by changing her strategy to  $s'_i$ . Since the game has strategic substitutes, an opponent's reaction must be in the externality-higher direction, which further increases player  $i$ 's payoff.
2. Consider an auxiliary game in which player  $i$  is restricted to choosing strategies that are weakly externalities-higher than  $s^i$ . It is straightforward to show that the restricted game admits a Nash equilibrium  $s^{NE}$ , and that since the game has strategic substitutes and the unclustered utilities are strictly concave, the profile  $s^{NE}$  has to be a Nash equilibrium of the original game, and that it must satisfy  $s_i \preceq_{-i} s_i^{NE}$  and  $s_{-i} \succeq_i s_{-i}^{NE}$ .

See Appendix A.8 for details. □

Thus, the qualitative predictions are different in the two classes of CUE outcomes. In the first class, both players deviate from unclustered best replying in the direction that is beneficial to the opponent. In the second class, only one of the players deviates from unclustered best reply, and she does so in the direction that is harmful to the opponent. Taken together, Theorems 1–3 imply that CUEs predict cooperative outcomes in which players treat each other better than the unclustered best replies in games with strategic complements, while the prediction for games with strategic substitutes is ambiguous, and depends on whether one or both players cluster payoffs together. Experimental evidence supporting our theoretical predictions is presented by Potters and Suetens (2009), who show that there is significantly more cooperation in two-player interval games with strategic complements than in games with strategic substitutes, and by Suetens and Potters (2007), who present similar results for oligopoly experiments. Our results are demonstrated in the following example of Cournot competition.

**Example 5.** We expand on the discussion of the symmetric Cournot game presented in Examples 1-3. Recall that  $S_i = [0, 1]$ ,  $\pi_i(s_i, s_{-i}) = s_i \cdot (1 - s_i - s_{-i})$ , the best-reply function of each player  $i$  is given by  $BR_i(s_{-i}) = \frac{1-s_{-i}}{2}$ , and that the payoff of player  $i$  when choosing quantity  $s_i$  and facing a best-replying opponent is  $\frac{s_i \cdot (1-s_i)}{2}$ , which is strictly concave and has a unique maximal payoff of 0.125 obtained by choosing the Stackelberg-leader quantity  $s_i = 0.5$ .

We begin by characterizing the CUE in which one of the players (player  $-i$ ) plays her unclustered best reply. Theorem 3 implies that  $s_i \geq \frac{1}{3}$ . Observe that  $s_i$  cannot be larger than 0.5, because otherwise player  $i$  would gain by deviating to clustering payoffs above 0.125 and following the improvement path that starts by changing her strategy to 0.5. Any  $s_i \in [\frac{1}{3}, \frac{1}{2}]$  can be supported as such a CUE outcome by having player  $i$  clustering all payoffs and player  $-i$  clustering the payoffs below her CUE payoff. This is so because: (1) player  $-i$  cannot benefit from deviating to a different clustering, because it will result in a plausible equilibrium in which player  $i$  plays  $s_i$ , and player  $-i$  cannot increase her payoff as she is already playing her best reply to  $s_i$ , and (2) player  $i$  cannot benefit from deviating to a different clustering, as non-trivial improvement path would require her to reduce her strategy. This would result in a plausible equilibrium in which player  $i$  plays a strategy strictly lower than  $s_i$  and player  $-i$  plays her unclustered best reply, leading to a lower payoff for player  $i$  due to the strict concavity of  $\frac{s_i \cdot (1-s_i)}{2}$ .

Next, we characterize the CUE in which neither player plays her unclustered best reply. Theorem 1 implies that each player chooses a lower quantity than her unclustered best reply. If  $s_i < \min(s_{-i}, BR_i(s_{-i}))$ , then  $(s_i, s_{-i})$  cannot be a CUE outcome, because for a sufficiently small  $\epsilon > 0$ , player  $i$  gains by clustering the payoffs above  $\pi_i(1 - s_i - s_{-i} - \epsilon, s_{-i})$ , and changing her strategy to  $1 - s_i - s_{-i} - \epsilon$ . Any payoff-improving opponent's reaction must be to a lower quantity, which further benefits player  $i$ . Next observe that any symmetric profile  $(s_i, s_i)$  cannot be a CUE outcome for either (1)  $s_i > \frac{1}{3}$ , because the players play above their unclustered best reply, and (2) for any  $s_i < \frac{1}{4}$ , because player  $i$  gains by deviating to clustering the payoffs above  $\pi_i(0.5, s_i)$  and deviating to 0.5.

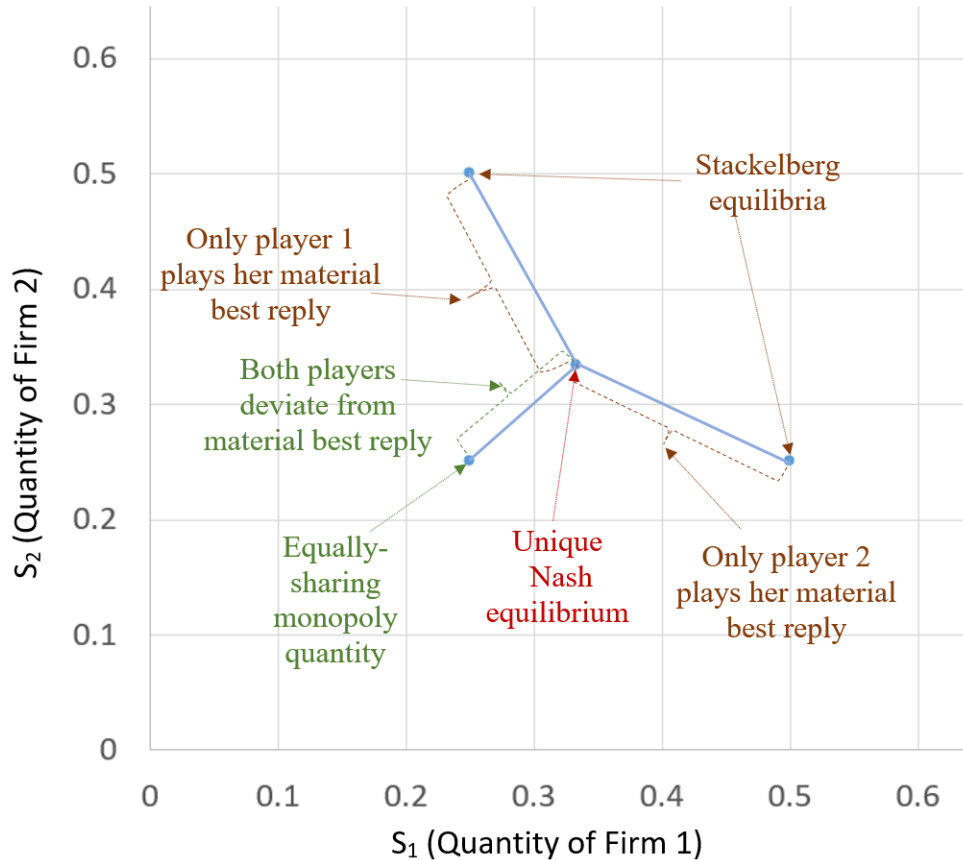
Finally, note that a symmetric profile  $(s_i, s_i)$  can be supported as a CUE outcome for all  $s_i \in [\frac{1}{4}, \frac{1}{3}]$  by having each player cluster together the payoffs above the CUE payoff  $\pi_i(s_i, s_i)$ . To see this, fix  $s_i \in [\frac{1}{4}, \frac{1}{3}]$ , and consider any deviation of player  $i$  to a different clustering. Observe that the set of plausible equilibria is not empty: if  $(s_i, s_i)$  is not an equilibrium, then there must be  $s'_i > s_i$ , such that player  $i$  increases her clustered payoff by changing her strategy to  $s'_i$ . Next, player  $-i$  increase her payoff by changing her strategy to  $\frac{1}{3}$ , and either  $s'_i, \frac{1}{3}$  or  $\frac{1}{3}, \frac{1}{3}$  is a plausible equilibrium.

We are left to show that player  $i$  is weakly outperformed in any plausible equilibrium.

Observe, that: (1) the first step in any improvement path is player  $i$  choosing a strategy in  $[s_i, 1 - 2s_i]$ , which is followed by player  $-i$  weakly increasing her strategy. By iterating this argument, one can show that in any convergence point of the improvement path, (1) the sum of strategies is at least  $2s_i$  (which implies that at least one of the players is weakly worse off relative to  $\pi_i(s_i, s_i)$ ), (2) player  $-i$  strategy is weakly higher than  $s_i$ , (3) player  $-i$  is either best replying or gets a payoff of at least  $\pi_i(s_i, s_i)$ . These observations imply that player  $i$  is weakly outperformed, which shows that  $(s_i, s_i)$  is a CUE outcome.

Thus the set of CUE outcomes (illustrated in Figure 2) includes 3 intervals that intersect in the unique Nash equilibrium  $(\frac{1}{3}, \frac{1}{3})$ : two intervals that end in the Stackelberg equilibria, in which one of the players plays her unclustered best reply and the sum of payoffs is lower than in the Nash equilibrium; and an interval that ends in the efficient profile  $(\frac{1}{4}, \frac{1}{4})$  in which both players equally divide the monopoly quantity. In the latter interval, both players gain a higher payoff than in the Nash equilibrium.

Figure 2: The Set of CUE Outcomes in Example 5 (Cournot competition)



## 5 Conclusion

We have considered the strategic implications of coarsening utilities by clustering payoffs together. This led us to a new solution concept, coarse-utility equilibrium (CUE). Clustering captures a common human phenomenon: the fact that people describe outcomes using terms like “good”/“bad”, or “unacceptable”/“fair”/“generous”. Perhaps not surprisingly, CUE is able to capture in a reasonably natural way cooperation in prisoner’s dilemma, by assuming that people use satisficing and cluster all outcomes above their aspiration level. Less trivially, we show that CUE makes interesting predictions that are consistent with experimental evidence in interval games with monotone externalities.

A common form of payoff clustering found in many CUEs, where neither player maximizes their unclustered payoffs, involves each player (1) clustering payoffs above their CUE payoff level (at least up to the level achievable by best replying) and (2) not clustering payoffs below their CUE payoff level, allowing them to respond to potential decreases in payoff due to changes in the opponent’s strategy. This clustering behavior resembles prospect theory’s concept of loss aversion (Kahneman and Tversky, 1979), where agents focus more on losses than gains, using the CUE payoff as the reference point.

Of course, many explanations besides clustering can explain players’ behaviors in the games that we consider. We need experimental evidence to verify that clustering is really what is going on. One possible direction to test our model is by designing experiments involving some of the games we discuss in the paper. These experiments could compare a treatment in which the play of the game is preceded by a stage of pre-play communication with a treatment in which the game is played without communication. Such comparisons can reveal the extent to which the difference between Nash equilibria and the equilibria predicted by our model is confirmed in the lab. The pre-play communication can be designed to permit only messages regarding clustering, so as to examine the extent to which players’ choice of clustering is consistent with our model. We hope to carry out these experiments in future work.

The evolutionary interpretation of our model suggests that agents gradually learn to coarsen their payoffs, while their behavior, given these coarse utilities, follows the standard static Nash equilibrium concept. A promising avenue for future research would be to explore multidimensional learning of both payoff clustering and behavior, potentially within the framework of stochastic evolutionary game theory (see, e.g., Young, 2015).

# Appendices

## A proofs

### A.1 Proof of Proposition 4 (Folk Theorem for Weak CUE)

The following simple observation will be useful in the proof of Proposition 4. (The standard proof is omitted for brevity.)

**Lemma 1.**

1. *The maximin payoff  $\underline{M}_i$  depends only on the payoff function of player  $i$ , and not on the payoff function of the opponent.*
2. *Each player must obtain at least her maximin payoff in all Nash equilibria; that is, if  $s \in NE(G)$  then  $\pi_i(s) \geq \underline{M}_i$ .*

*Proof of Proposition 4.*

1. Assume to the contrary that  $s$  is a weak CUE outcome and that it is not individually rational. Let  $(f, s)$  be a weak CUE. Let  $i$  be a player for which  $\pi_i(s) < \underline{M}_i$ . Consider a deviation by player  $i$  to  $f'_i = Id_i$  (i.e., not clustering any payoffs together). Let  $s'$  be a Nash equilibrium of  $G_{(Id_i, f_{-i})}$ . Lemma 1 implies that  $\pi_i(s') \geq \underline{M}_i$ , which contradicts the assumption that  $(f, s)$  is a weak CUE outcome.
2. Assume that  $s$  is strongly individually rational. Let  $f^{\mathbb{R}}$  be the symmetric profile in which all players cluster together all payoffs. It is immediate that  $s \in NE(G_{f^{\mathbb{R}}})$ . Fix an arbitrary player  $i$ . Let  $\bar{s}_{-i} \in S_{-i}$  be the strategy profile that guarantees that player  $i$ 's payoff is at most  $\bar{M}_i$  (i.e.,  $\pi_i(s''_i, \bar{s}_{-i}) \leq \bar{M}_i$  for each  $s''_i \in S_i$ ). For each clustering  $f'_i$ , let  $s'_i$  be an **unclustered** best reply of player  $i$  against  $\bar{s}_{-i}$ . Observe that  $s'_i$  is also a **clustered best reply**,  $(s'_i, \bar{s}_{-i}) \in NE(G_{(f'_i, f^{\mathbb{R}}_{-i})})$  and that  $\pi_i(s'_i, \bar{s}_{-i}) \leq \bar{M}_i \leq \pi_i(s)$ , which implies that  $(f^{\mathbb{R}}, s)$  is a weak CUE.  $\square$

### A.2 Proof of Proposition 5 (Conditions Implying Strong CUE)

Let  $f^{\geq \pi(s)} = (f_i^{\geq \pi_i(s)}, f_{-i}^{\geq \pi_{-i}(s)})$  be the profile in which each player clusters all the payoffs above her CUE payoff. We show that  $(f^{\geq \pi(s)}, s)$  is a strong CUE. Assume to the contrary that  $(f^{\geq \pi(s)}, s)$  is not a strong CUE. Then there exists a player  $i$ , a clustering  $f'_i$ , and an equilibrium  $s' \in NE(G_{(f'_i, f_{-i}^{\geq \pi_{-i}(s)})})$  such that  $\pi_i(s') > \pi_i(s)$ . The fact that  $s' \in NE(G_{(f'_i, f_{-i}^{\geq \pi_{-i}(s)})})$  implies that either  $\pi_{-i}(s') \geq \pi_{-i}(s)$  or  $s'_{-i} \in BR_{-i}(s'_i)$ , which contradicts either condition (1) or condition (2) above.

### A.3 Proof of Proposition 6 (Stackelberg Equilibrium $s$ is a CUE)

The fact that player  $-i$  plays her best reply implies that, following any deviation by player  $-i$  to a different clustering, the unique equilibrium path remains the trivial one where neither player changes her strategy, keeping us in the plausible equilibrium  $s$ . Since player  $-i$  does not cluster payoffs, she always best replies, which, due to condition 2 of Definition 6, ensures that player  $i$  cannot gain by deviating to a different clustering in any equilibrium of the new clustered game. Thus,  $\left(\left(f_i^{\mathbb{R}}, f_{-i}^{\emptyset}\right), s\right)$  is a CUE.

### A.4 CUE in Constant-Sum Games

*Proof of Proposition 7.*

1. Let  $s \in NE(G)$ . We show that  $(f^{\emptyset}, s)$  is a strong CUE. Fix a player  $i$  and any clustering  $f_i$ . By Lemma 1 in Appendix A.1:

$$s' \in NE\left(G_{(f_i, Id_{-i})}\right) \Rightarrow \pi_{-i}(s') \geq M_{-i} \Rightarrow \pi_i(s') \leq M_i \leq \pi_i(s) \Rightarrow (f^{\emptyset}, s) \text{ is a strong CUE.}$$

2. Let  $(f, s)$  be a weak CUE. Fix a player  $i$  and let  $s' \in NE\left(G_{(f_i^{\emptyset}, f_{-i})}\right)$  with  $\pi_i(s') \leq \pi(s)$ . By Lemma 1 in Appendix A.1,  $\pi_i(s') \geq M_i$ . It follows that  $\pi_i(s) \geq M_i$ . The game being constant-sum implies that  $\pi_1(s) + \pi_2(s) = M_1 + M_2$ , which implies that  $\pi_i(s) = M_i$  for each  $i \in I$ .  $\square$

The following example shows that an underlying zero-sum game might admit a strong CUE outcome that is not a Nash equilibrium (although it will provide each player her unique Nash equilibrium payoff).

**Example 6** (Non-Nash strong CUE outcome in a zero-sum Game). Consider the zero-sum game  $G_{zs}$  that is presented in Table 3 below. Consider the symmetric clustering profile  $f^{\geq 0}$  in which the players cluster all non-negative payoffs together. We show that  $(f^{\geq 0}, (b, b))$  is a strong CUE, although  $(b, b)$  is not a Nash equilibrium of  $G_{zs}$ . Observe first that  $(b, b) \in NE(G_{f^{\geq 0}})$ . Next, consider a deviation by player  $i$  to a clustering  $f'_i$ . Let  $s' \in NE(G_{(f'_i, f_{-i}^{\geq 0})})$  be a Nash equilibrium of the coarse-utility game  $G_{(f'_i, f_{-i}^{\geq 0})}$ . Observe that the opponent can guarantee a clustered payoff of at least 0 in  $G_{(f'_i, f_{-i}^{\geq 0})}$  by playing  $a$ . This implies that  $f_{-i}^{\geq 0}(\pi_{-i}(s')) \geq 0 \Rightarrow \pi_{-i}(s') \geq 0$ . The fact that the game is zero sum implies that  $\pi_i(s') \leq 0$ , and, thus  $(f^{\geq 0}, (b, b))$  is a strong CUE.

Table 3: Underlying Zero-Sum Game  $G_{zs}$

|   | a   | b    | c    |
|---|-----|------|------|
| a | 0,0 | 0,0  | 0,0  |
| b | 0,0 | 0,0  | -1,1 |
| c | 0,0 | 1,-1 | 0,0  |

## A.5 Proof of Proposition 8 (Games with Common Interests)

1. Proposition 3 implies that  $s \in NE(G)$  so  $s$  is a CUE outcome. Next, assume to the contrary that  $(f, s)$  is a CUE and that  $s \notin NE(G)$ . The fact that  $s \notin NE(G)$  implies that there exists player  $i \in I$  and strategy  $s'_i$ , such that  $\pi_i(s) < \pi_i(s'_i, s_{-i})$ . Consider a deviation by player  $i$  to  $f_i^\emptyset$  (i.e., to not clustering any payoffs). Observe that  $s \notin NE(G_{(f_i^\emptyset, f_{-i})})$ , and that the fact that the game has common interests implies that the payoffs of all players strictly improve in an improvement path. Consider the improvement path in which at each stage one of the players who is not best-replying changes her strategy to a **pure unclustered** best reply. The improvement path cannot have a cycle (since the payoffs of all players strictly increase) and it must converge to some  $s'' \in PNE(G_{(Id_i, f_{-i})}, s)$ . It is immediate that  $\pi_i(s'') > \pi_i(s)$ , which contradicts  $(f, s)$  being a CUE.
2. If  $s$  is a Pareto-dominant Nash equilibrium, then it is immediate that  $(Id, s)$  is a strong CUE because  $\pi_i(s') \leq \pi_i(s)$  for any strategy profile  $s'$ . Next, assume to the contrary that  $(f, s)$  is a strong CUE and  $s$  is not a Pareto-dominant Nash equilibrium of  $G$ . Let  $s'$  be a Pareto-dominant Nash equilibrium of  $G$ . Proposition 1 implies that  $s' \in NE(G_{f'})$  for any clustering profile  $f'$ . This implies that if a player  $i$  deviates to a clustering  $f''_i$ , then  $s' \in NE(G_{(f''_i, f_{-i})})$  and  $\pi_i(s') > \pi_i(s)$ , which contradicts  $(f, s)$  being a strong CUE.

## A.6 Proof of Theorem 1 (Games with Monotone Externalities)

Let  $f$  be a clustering profile  $f$  for which  $(f, s)$  is a CUE.

Part (1): Assume to the contrary that  $s_i \not\prec_{-i} BR_i(s_{-i})$ . The assumption that  $s_i \notin BR_i(s_{-i})$  implies that  $s_i \prec_{-i} (BR_i(s_{-i}))$ . Let  $s'_{-i} \neq s_{-i}$  be a strategy that satisfies the following two properties: (1)  $s'_{-i}$  is closer to  $BR_{-i}(s_i)$  than  $s_{-i}$ , and (2)  $s'_{-i}$  is sufficiently close to  $s_{-i}$  that  $s_i \prec_{-i} BR_i(s'_{-i})$  (such a strategy  $s'_{-i}$  exists because the set of strategies that are (strictly) externalities-lower than  $BR_i(s'_{-i})$  is open). Let  $\pi'_{-i} = \pi_{-i}(s'_{-i}, s_i)$ . Consider a deviation by player  $-i$  to the clustering  $f_{-i}^{\geq \pi'_{-i}}$  and the following improvement path in  $G\left(f_{-i}^{\geq \pi'_{-i}}, f_i\right)$

with respect to  $s$ . First, player  $-i$  deviates to  $s'_{-i}$  (which strictly increases her clustered payoff). Next, if  $s_i$  is not a clustered best reply to  $s'_{-i}$ , then player  $i$  changes her strategy to a strategy  $s'_i$  that is a clustered best reply to  $s'_{-i}$ , and otherwise  $s'_i = s_i$ . The assumption that  $s_i \prec_{-i} BR_i(s'_{-i})$  implies that  $s_i \preceq_{-i} s'_i$ . Observe that following these two stages, the improvement path converges to a plausible equilibrium. Since the game has monotone externalities, this plausible equilibrium yields player  $-i$  a strictly higher unclustered payoff than  $\pi_{-i}(s)$ , which contradicts  $s$  being a CUE outcome.

Part (2): Assume to the contrary that there exists a strategy profile  $s'$  satisfying  $s'_i \preceq_{-i} s_i$ ,  $s'_{-i} \preceq_i s_{-i}$ ,  $\pi_i(s') > \pi_i(s)$ , and either (a)  $\pi_{-i}(s') \geq \pi_{-i}(s)$  or (b)  $s'_{-i} \in BR_{-i}(s'_i)$ . Observe that monotone externalities imply that  $s'_i \neq s_i$ . Let  $\pi'_i = \pi_i(s')$ . Consider a deviation by player  $i$  to the clustering  $f_i^{\geq \pi'_i}$  and the following improvement path in  $G_{(f_i^{\geq \pi'_i}, f_{-i})}$  with respect to  $s$ . First, player  $i$  deviates to the strategy  $s'_i$  that gives her a strictly higher clustered payoff

$$\pi_i(s'_i, s_{-i}) \geq \pi_i(s') \Rightarrow f_i^{\geq \pi'_i}(\pi_i(s'_i, s_{-i})) = \pi_i(s') > \pi_i(s) = f_i^{\geq \pi'_i}(\pi_i(s)),$$

where the first inequality is due to the monotone externalities. If  $s_{-i}$  is a clustered best reply against  $s'_i$ , then  $(s'_i, s_{-i}) \in PNE(G_{(f_i^{\geq \pi'_i}, f_{-i})}, s)$  is a plausible equilibrium that gives the deviating player  $i$  a higher payoff, and we get a contradiction to  $(f, s)$  being a CUE. Otherwise, player  $-i$  deviates to  $s'_{-i}$ . There are now two cases:

1.  $\pi_{-i}(s') \geq \pi_{-i}(s)$ : Observe that

$$f_{-i}(BRP_{-i}(s_i)) \geq f_{-i}(BRP_{-i}(s'_i)) \geq f_{-i}(\pi_{-i}(s')) \geq f_{-i}(\pi_{-i}(s)), \quad (1)$$

where the first inequality is due to monotone externalities and the last inequality is implied by  $\pi_{-i}(s') \geq \pi_{-i}(s)$ . The fact that  $s \in NE(G_f)$  implies that  $f_{-i}(BRP_{-i}(s_i)) = f_{-i}(\pi_{-i}(s))$ , and thus all the terms in (1) are equal to each other, which implies that  $s' \in PNE(G_{(f_i^{\geq \pi'_i}, f_{-i})}, s)$  (because  $s'_{-i}$  is a clustered best reply to  $s'_i$ ).

2.  $s'_{-i} \in BR_{-i}(s'_i)$ : It is immediate that  $s' \in PNE(G_{(f_i^{\geq \pi'_i}, f_{-i})}, s)$ .

In both cases,  $s'$  is a plausible equilibrium that gives the deviating player  $i$  a higher payoff, so we get a contradiction to  $(f, s)$  being a CUE.

## A.7 Proof of Theorem 2 (Strategic Complements)

In order to prove Theorem 2, we need the following lemma:



**Lemma 2.** *If  $G$  is an interval game with strategic complements and monotone externalities,  $s^{WNE}$  is the worst Nash equilibrium of  $G$ , and  $s$  is a strategy profile satisfying  $s_i \succeq_{-i} BR_i(s_{-i})$  for each player  $i$ , then  $s_i \succeq_{-i} s_i^{WNE}$  for each player  $i$ .*

*Proof.* Assume to the contrary that there exists a player  $j$  for which  $s_j \prec_{-j} s_j^{WNE}$ . Consider an auxiliary game  $G^R$  similar to  $G$  except that each player  $i$  is restricted to choosing a strategy  $\tilde{s}_i$  satisfying  $\tilde{s}_i \preceq_{-i} s_i^*$ . By a standard fixed-point theorem (Kakutani, 1941), the restricted game admits a Nash equilibrium that we denote  $s^{RE}$ . The strategy profile  $s^{RE}$  cannot be a Nash equilibrium of  $G$  because  $s_j \succeq_{-j} s_j^{RE}$ , while  $s_j \prec_{-j} s_j^{WNE}$ . This implies that there exists a player  $i$  for which  $s_i^{RE} = s_i$  and  $s_i \prec_{-i} BR_i(s_{-i}^{RE})$ , which contradicts  $s_i \succeq_{-i} BR_i(s_{-i}) \succeq_{-i} BR_i(s_{-i}^{RE})$  (where the latter inequality is implied by the assumption that  $G$  has strategic complements and the fact that  $s_{-i}^{RE} \preceq_i s_{-i}$ ).  $\square$

We can now prove Theorem 2. For the “if” direction, suppose that Conditions 1–2 holds. Let  $f^{\geq \pi(s)} = (f_i^{\geq \pi_i(s)}, f_{-i}^{\geq \pi_{-i}(s)})$  be the profile in which each player clusters all the payoffs above her payoff in profile  $s$ . We show that  $(f^{\geq \pi(s)}, s)$  is a CUE. Assume to the contrary that  $(f^{\geq \pi(s)}, s)$  is not a CUE. Then there exists a player  $i$  and a clustering  $f'_i$ , such that either (1) there exists a plausible equilibrium  $s' \in PNE(G_{(f'_i, f_{-i}^{\geq \pi_{-i}(s)})})$  such that  $\pi_i(s') > \pi_i(s)$ , or (2)  $PNE(G_{(f'_i, f_{-i}^{\geq \pi_{-i}(s)})})$  is empty. We begin by ruling out (2). Consider an improvement path in which for each  $k$  each player that is currently not playing her clustered best reply, changes her strategy to her externalities-higher unclustered best reply. Observe that condition 1 of the theorem implies that the initial change of each player is to an externalities-lower strategy. Strategic complements further implies that any change of a player’s strategy is to an externalities lower strategy. This, in turn, implies that the improvement path has a convergence point, which must be a plausible equilibrium.

The fact that either  $s_j \succ_{-i} BR_j(s_{-j})$  or  $s_j \in BR_i(s_{-j})$  for each player  $j$  implies that the first deviation of player  $i$  is to an externalities-lower strategy with a strictly higher payoff, that is,  $s_i^1 \prec_{-i} s_i$  and  $\pi_i(s_i^1, s_{-i}) > \pi_i(s)$ , and no strategy between  $s_i$  and  $s_i^1$  has a higher clustered payoff than  $s_i^1$ , i.e.,  $f_i(\pi_i(s_i^1, s_{-i})) \geq f_i(\pi_i(\hat{s}_i, s_{-i}))$  for any  $\hat{s}_i$  between  $s_i$  and  $s_i^1$ .

Since the game has strategic complements, any payoff-improving deviation in the second stage of any player  $j$  must be to a strategy  $s_2^j$  that is externalities-lower than  $s_j^1$ , and no strategy between  $s_j^1$  and  $s_2^j$  yields a higher clustered payoff than  $s_2^j$ . The same argument implies that at every later stage, a payoff-improving deviation by any player  $j$  must be to a strategy  $s_j^k \preceq_{-j} s_j^{k-1} \preceq_{-j} s_j$  (and that no strategy in between  $s_j^k$  and  $s_j^{k-1}$  yields a higher clustered payoff). Thus, the convergence point of the improvement path  $s'$  must be externalities-lower than  $s$ . The fact that player  $-i$  has clustering  $f_{-i}^{\geq \pi(s)}$  implies that player  $-i$  either

1. obtains a payoff weakly higher than in  $s$  (i.e.,  $\pi_{-i}(s') \geq \pi_{-i}(s)$ , which implies that  $s'$  Pareto dominates  $s$ , violating condition (2a)), or
2. she plays an unclustered best reply ( $s'_{-i} \in BR_{-i}(s'_i)$ ), which violates condition (2b).

Thus, both cases lead to a contradiction, which proves that  $(f^{\geq \pi(s)}, s)$  must be a CUE.

For the “only if” direction, by Theorem 1, it suffices to consider the case where one of the players, say player 2, plays her unclustered best reply (i.e.,  $s_2 \in BR_2(s_1)$ ). Let  $(f, s)$  be a CUE. We begin by showing that Condition (1) holds. Assume to the contrary that player 1 plays an externalities-lower reply, that is,  $s_1 \prec_2 BR_1(s_2)$ . Let  $s_1 \prec_2 s'_1 \in BR_1(s_2)$ . Let  $\pi'_1 = \pi_1(s'_1, s_2) > \pi_1(s)$ . Consider a deviation by player 1 to  $f_1^{\geq \pi'_1}$ , which clusters together payoffs larger than  $\pi'_1$ , and the following two-stage improvement path in  $G_{(f_1^{\geq \pi'_1}, f_2)}$  with respect to  $s$ :

1. Player 1 changes her strategy to  $s'_1$  (which strictly increases her clustered payoff).
2. If  $s_2$  is not a clustered best reply against  $s'_1$ , then player 2 changes her strategy to  $s'_2 \in BR_2(s'_1)$  (observe that  $s_2 \preceq_1 s'_2$  due to the game having strategic complements, which further increases player 1’s payoff).

At the end of these two stages we have reached a plausible equilibrium  $(s'_1, s'_2) \in PNE(G_{(f_1^{\geq \pi'_1}, f_2)}, s)$  with a strictly higher payoff for player 1 (i.e.,  $\pi_1(s'_1, s'_2) > \pi_1(s)$ ), which contradicts  $(f, s)$  being a CUE. The proof that condition (2) holds is essentially the same as in Theorem 1, and is omitted for brevity.

Finally, we prove the “moreover” condition in the last sentence of the theorem statement. The inequality  $s_i \succeq_{-i} BR_{i(s_{-i})}$  implies that  $s_i \succeq_{-i} s_i^{WNE}$  for each player  $i$  by Lemma 2. Finally, we have to show that  $\pi_i(s) \geq \pi_i(s^{WNE})$  for each player  $i$ . Assume to the contrary that one of the players, say player 1, obtains a strictly lower payoff than in the lowest Nash equilibrium, that is,  $\pi_1(s) < \pi_1(s^{WNE})$ . Consider a deviation by player 1 to  $f_1^\emptyset$  (not clustering any payoffs together). Consider the following improvement path. Let  $s^0 = s$ . In stage 1, if  $s_1^0 \notin BR_1(s_2^0)$ , then player 1 decreases her strategy to an unclustered best reply strategy  $s_1^1 \in BR_1(s_2^0)$ , which satisfies  $s_1^{WNE} \preceq_2 s_1^1$ . Since  $s_1^1 \preceq_2 s_1^0$  and the game has strategic complements,  $s_2^1 = s_2^0 \succeq_1 BR_2(s_1^1)$ . In stage 2, if  $s_2^1$  is not a clustered best reply to  $s_1^1$ , then player 2 decreases her strategy to an unclustered best reply  $s_2^2 \in BR_2(s_1^1)$ , and because the game has strategic complements,  $s_2^2 \succeq_1 s_2^{WNE}$ . A straightforward induction shows that (1) for every even  $k$ , in stage  $k+1$ , if  $s_1^k \notin BR_1(s_2^k)$ , then player 1 decreases her strategy to an unclustered best reply, that is,  $s_1^{k+1} \in BR_1(s_2^k)$ , which satisfies  $s_1^{k+1} \succeq_2 s_1^{WNE}$

(because the game has strategic complements), and (2) for every odd  $k$ , in stage  $k + 1$ , if  $s_2^k$  is not a clustered best reply to  $s_1^k$ , then player 2 decreases her payoff to an unclustered best reply, that is,  $s_2^{k+1} \in BR_2(s_1^k)$ , which satisfies  $s_2^{k+1} \succeq_1 s_2^{WNE}$  (the change must be a decrease for both even and odd  $k$ 's, since the game has strategic complements). The fact that the players always decrease their strategies (whenever they change them) implies that the improvement path converges, and the limit  $s'$  must be a plausible equilibrium that satisfies (1)  $s'_1 \in BR_1(s'_2)$ , and (2)  $s'_i \succeq_{-i} s_i^{WNE}$  for each player  $i$ . This implies that  $\pi_1(s') \geq \pi_1(s_1^{WNE}, s_2') \geq \pi_1(s^{WNE}) > \pi_1(s)$ , which contradicts  $(f, s)$  being a CUE.

## A.8 Proof of Theorem 3 (Strategic Substitutes)

1. Assume to the contrary that  $s_i \succ BR_i(s_{-i})$ . Let  $s'_i \in BR_i(s_{-i})$  be an unclustered best reply strategy. Observe that  $s'_i \prec_{-i} s_i$ . Let  $\pi'_i = \pi_i(s'_i, s_{-i})$ . Consider a deviation of player  $i$  to the clustering  $f_i^{\geq \pi'_i}$ . Consider the following improvement path. In the first stage, player  $i$  changes her strategy to  $s_i^1 = s'_i$ . If  $s_{-i}$  is a clustered best reply of player  $-i$ , then this ends the improvement path. Otherwise, the improvement path includes an additional final stage in which player 2 changes her strategy to an unclustered best reply, i.e.,  $s_{-i}^2 \in BR_{-i}(s_i^1)$ . Strategic substitutability implies that  $s_{-i}^2 \succ_i s_{-i}$ . Observe that player  $i$  obtains a strictly higher payoff in the plausible Nash equilibrium that ends this improvement path relative to  $\pi_i(s)$ , which contradicts  $(f, s)$  being a CUE.
2. Consider an auxiliary game  $G^R$  similar to  $G$  except that player  $i$  is restricted to choosing strategies that are weakly externalities-higher than  $s_i$ . By a standard fixed-point theorem (Kakutani, 1941), the restricted game admits a Nash equilibrium that we denote  $s^{RE}$ . If  $s^{RE}$  is not a Nash equilibrium of the original underlying game  $G$ , then it must be that  $s_i^{RE} = s_i$  and  $s_i \succ_{-i} BR_i(s_{-i}^{RE})$ . The assumption that the payoff function is strictly concave implies that  $s_{-i} = s_{-i}^{RE}$  is the unique best reply to  $s_i$ . Due to part (1)  $s_i \preceq_{-i} BR_i(s_{-i}) = BR_i(s_{-i}^{RE})$ , and we get a contradiction. Thus,  $s^{RE}$  must be a Nash equilibrium of the unrestricted game  $G$ . It is immediate that  $s_i \preceq_{-i} s_i^{RE}$ . Finally, the fact that the game has strategic substitutes implies that  $s_{-i} \succeq_i s_{-i}^{RE}$ .

## B Partial Observability

Throughout the paper, we assume that if an agent deviates to a different clustering, the opponent always observes this change. In this appendix, we relax this assumption and demonstrate that our results also hold under partial observability. Most results apply to any level of partial observability, while the remaining results hold for sufficiently high levels of

observability. This extension is analogous to [Heller and Winter \(2020, Online Appendix E\)](#) and aligns with the observation structure of [Dekel et al. \(2007\)](#).

## B.1 Adapted Model

Let  $p \in [0, 1]$  denote the probability that an agent who is matched with an opponent who deviates to a different clustering *privately* observes the opponent's deviation (henceforth, *observation probability*). If an agent does not observe the deviation, then she continues playing her original CUE strategy.

We define a  $p$ -restricted coarse-utility game as a game between an incumbent (player  $-i$ ) and a deviator (player  $i$ ) in which the incumbent is restricted to playing her original strategy  $s_{-i}$  with probability  $1 - p$  (i.e., when not observing the opponent's deviation). Formally:

**Definition 11.** Fix player  $-i$ , clustering profile  $f$  and strategy  $s_{-i}$ . The payoff function  $\pi_j^p$  of each player  $j$  in the  $p$ -restricted coarse-utility game  $G_{f,s_{-i}}^p = (S, f \circ \pi^p)$ , where  $\pi^p$  is defined as follows:

$$\pi_j^p(s'|s_{-i}) = p \cdot \pi_j(s') + (1 - p) \cdot \pi_j(s'_i, s_{-i}).$$

The deviator (player  $i$ ) is aware that her different clustering is privately observed by her opponent (player  $-i$ ) with probability  $p$ . Thus, the deviator faces two different possible payoffs (one when her clustering is observed by her opponent, and one when it is not observed); she evaluates her expected payoff as the mixed average of these two outcomes ( $\pi_j^p(s'|s_{-i})$ ), and uses her coarse utility to obtain her final evaluation of her payoff ( $f_i \circ \pi_i^p(s'|s_{-i})$ ).

The set  $NE(G_{f,s_{-i}}^p)$  of Nash equilibria of  $G_{f,s_{-i}}^p$  is defined in the standard way. Next, we adapt our definition of plausible equilibrium.

**Definition 12.** Fix a strategy profile  $s$  and a clustering profile  $f$ . An equilibrium  $s' \in NE(G_{f,s_{-i}}^p)$  is  $p$ -plausible with respect to  $s$  if there is a sequence  $(s^k)_{k \geq 0}$  of strategy profiles satisfying: (1)  $s^0 = s$ , (2)  $\lim_{k \rightarrow \infty} s^k = s'$ , and (3) if  $s_j^{k+1} \neq s_j^k$  for player  $j$  and  $k \geq 0$ , then (I)  $f_j \circ \pi_j^p(s_j^{k+1}, s_{-j}^k) > f_j \circ \pi_j^p(s_j^k, s_{-j}^k)$ , and (II) for any strategy  $\hat{s}_j \in S_j$  between  $s_j^k$  and  $s_j^{k+1}$ ,  $f_j \left( \pi_i^p \left( s_j^{k+1}, s_{-j}^k \right) \right) \geq f_j \left( \pi_i^p \left( \hat{s}_j, s_{-j}^k \right) \right)$ .

Let  $PNE^p(G_{f,s_{-i}}^p, s)$  be the set of  $p$ -plausible equilibria with respect to  $s$ . Next, we adapt the three variants of our solution concept to the setup of partial observability.

**Definition 13.** A pair  $(f, s)$ , where  $f$  is a clustering profile and  $s$  is a strategy profile satisfying  $s \in NE(G_f)$ , is a

1. *weak  $p$ -CUE* if for each player  $i$  and each clustering  $f'_i$ , there exists an equilibrium  $s' \in NE(G_{(f'_i, f_{-i}), s_{-i}}^p)$  such that  $\pi_i^p(s'|s_{-i}) \leq \pi_i(s)$ .

2.  $p$ -CUE if it is a **weak  $p$ -CUE**, and, in addition,  $\pi_i^p(s'|s_{-i}) \leq \pi_i(s)$  for each player  $i$ , each clustering  $f'_i$ , and each  $p$ -plausible equilibrium  $s' \in PNE^p(G_{(f'_i, f_{-i}), s_{-i}}^p, s)$ .
3. **strong  $p$ -CUE** if  $\pi_j^p(s'|s_{-i}) \leq \pi_i(s)$  for each player  $i$ , each clustering  $f'_i$ , and each equilibrium  $s' \in NE(G_{(f'_i, f_{-i}), s_{-i}}^p)$ .

## B.2 Adapted Results

We begin by adapting Proposition 2 to the current setup.

**Proposition 9.** Fix  $p \in [0, 1]$ . Let  $(f, s)$  be a strong  $p$ -CUE, and let  $s^{NE}$  be a Nash equilibrium. Then  $\pi_i(s) \geq \pi_i^p(s^{NE}|s_{-i}) \equiv p \cdot \pi_i(s^{NE}) + (1-p) \cdot \pi_i(s_i^{NE}, s_{-i})$  for each  $i$ .

*Proof.* The proof is immediate by considering a deviation of player  $i$  to clustering all payoffs together (i.e.,  $f_i^{\mathbb{R}}$ ) and the fact that  $s^{NE} \in NE(G_{(f_i^{\mathbb{R}}, f_{-i}), s_{-i}}^p)$ .  $\square$

It is easy to see that Proposition 3 can be extended to our setup.

**Proposition 10.** Let  $s^{NE}$  be a Nash equilibrium of the underlying game. Then  $(f, s^{NE})$  is a  $p$ -CUE for every clustering profile  $f$  and every  $p \in [0, 1]$ .

*Proof.* The proposition holds because  $s^{NE}$  is the **unique element** of  $PNE^p(G_{(f'_i, f_{-i}), s_{-i}^{NE}}, s^{NE})$  for every player  $i$  and clustering  $f'_i$ ;  $s^{NE}$  is a **plausible equilibrium** with respect to the constant improvement path  $(s^k)_{k \geq 0} = (s^{NE}, s^{NE}, \dots)$ .  $\square$

Next we show that the “folk-theorem” result for weak  $p$ -CUE holds for  $p$  sufficiently high (extending Proposition 4).

**Proposition 11.** Let  $s$  be a strategy profile.

1. If  $s$  is a weak  $p$ -CUE outcome for  $p \in [0, 1]$ , then  $s$  is individually rational.
2. If  $s$  is strongly individually rational **with a strict inequality** (i.e.,  $\pi_i(s) > \bar{M}_i$ ), then for some  $\bar{p} < 1$ ,  $s$  is a weak  $p$ -CUE outcome for all  $p \geq \bar{p}$ .

The proof, which is analogous to the proof of Proposition 4, is omitted for brevity.

In contrast to the “folk-theorem” result above, which requires the probability  $p$  to be sufficiently high, if  $p$  is sufficiently low, then only Nash equilibria can be weak  $p$ -CUE outcomes. That is, observability is necessary for coarse utility to introduce non-Nash behavior.

**Proposition 12.** Let  $s$  be a strategy profile.

1. If  $s$  is a weak 0-CUE outcome, then  $s$  is a Nash equilibrium of the underlying game.

2. If  $s$  is not a Nash equilibrium, then for some  $\bar{p} > 0$ ,  $s$  is not a weak  $p$ -CUE outcome for all  $p < \bar{p}$ .

*Proof.* The simple proof adapts an insight of [Ok and Vega-Redondo \(2001\)](#) from the evolution of preferences to the current setup.

1. Assume to the contrary that  $(f, s)$  is a weak 0-CUE and  $s$  is not a Nash equilibrium of the underlying game. This implies that there exists a player  $i$  and a strategy  $s'_i$  such that  $\pi_i(s'_i, s_{-i}) > \pi_i(s)$ . Observe that following a deviation of player  $i$  to not clustering payoffs (i.e., to  $f_i^\emptyset$ ), player  $-i$  must continue playing  $s_{-i}$  in any equilibrium of the post-deviation game (due to not observing the opponent's deviation), which implies that player  $i$  obtains payoff  $\pi_i(s'_i, s_{-i}) > \pi_i(s)$  in all equilibria  $s' \in NE(G_{(f_i^\emptyset, f_{-i}, s_{-i})}^0)$ , which contradicts  $s$  being a weak 0-CUE outcome.
2. Because  $s$  is not a Nash equilibrium of the underlying game, there exists a player  $i$  who can gain  $\delta$  by deviating. Let  $\Delta = \max_{s \in S} \pi_i(s) - \min_{s \in S} \pi_i(s)$  be the difference between the maximal and the minimal feasible payoff of player  $i$ . Let  $\bar{p}$  be any positive number that is smaller than  $\frac{\delta}{\delta + \Delta}$ . Observe that  $s$  cannot be a weak  $p$ -CUE outcome for  $p < \bar{p}$  because player  $i$ , by deviating to not clustering payoffs (i.e., to  $f_i^\emptyset$ ), gains at least  $\delta$  when her deviation is not observed, which outweighs her maximal feasible expected loss when her deviation is observed.  $\square$

It is easy to see that the Proposition 7 (characterization of  $p$ -CUE outcomes in constant-sum games), Proposition 8 (characterization of  $p$ -CUE outcomes in games with common interests), and Theorem 1 hold for all  $p \in [0, 1]$  (where  $p$ -CUE replaces CUE in the statement of each result) with minor adaptations to the proofs.

We next observe that the necessary conditions for being a  $p$ -CUE outcome in games with strategic complements are the same as in Theorem 2. By contrast, these conditions are no longer sufficient for being  $p$ -CUE outcomes. Specifically, one can show that lower values of  $p$  have smaller sets of  $p$ -CUE outcomes, which converge towards the set of Nash equilibria as  $p$  converges to zero. Formally, the adaptation of the necessary conditions of Theorem 2 to the current setup is as follows (the proof, which is analogous to the proof of Theorem 2, is omitted for brevity):

**Proposition 13.** *If  $G$  is an interval game with monotone externalities and strategic complements,  $s$  is an interior strategy profile,  $p \in [0, 1]$ , and  $s$  is a  $p$ -CUE outcome, then*

1.  $s_i \succeq_{-i} BR_i(s_{-i})$  for each player  $i$ ;

2. if  $s'_i \preceq_{-i} s_i$ ,  $s'_{-i} \preceq_i s_{-i}$ , and either (a)  $\pi_{-i}(s') \geq \pi_{-i}(s)$  or (b)  $s'_{-i} \in BR_{-i}(s'_i)$ , then  $\pi_i(s') \leq \pi_i(s)$ .

Finally, minor adaptations to the proof of Theorem 3 show that the necessary conditions for being a  $p$ -CUE outcome in games with strategic substitutes are the same as in Theorem 3 (where  $p$ -CUE outcome replaces CUE outcome).

## References

- Arieli, I., Y. Babichenko, and M. Tennenholtz (2017). Sequential commitment games. *Games and Economic Behavior* 105, 297–315.
- Azrieli, Y. (2009). Categorizing others in a large game. *Games and Economic Behavior* 67(2), 351–362.
- Bade, S., G. Haeringer, and L. Renou (2009). Bilateral commitment. *Journal of Economic Theory* 144(4), 1817–1831.
- Berman, R. and Y. Heller (2021). Naive analytics equilibrium. *Available at SSRN 3718803*.
- Daskalova, V. and N. J. Vriend (2020). Categorization and coordination. *European Economic Review* 129, 103519.
- Dekel, E., J. C. Ely, and O. Yilankaya (2007). Evolution of preferences. *Review of Economic Studies* 74(3), 685–704.
- Dienhart, J. M. (1999). A linguistic look at riddles. *Journal of pragmatics* 31(1), 95–125.
- Dubey, P. and J. Geanakoplos (2010). Grading exams: 100, 99, 98,... or a, b, c? *Games and Economic Behavior* 69(1), 72–94.
- Dufwenberg, M. and W. Güth (1999). Indirect evolution vs. strategic delegation: A comparison of two approaches to explaining economic institutions. *European Journal of Political Economy* 15(2), 281–295.
- Eswaran, M. and H. M. Neary (2014). An economic theory of the evolutionary emergence of property rights. *American Economic Journal: Microeconomics* 6(3), 203–26.
- Fershtman, C. and U. Gneezy (2001). Strategic delegation: An experiment. *RAND Journal of Economics* 32(2), 352–368.

- Fershtman, C. and K. L. Judd (1987). Equilibrium incentives in oligopoly. *American Economic Review* 77, 927–940.
- Fershtman, C. and E. Kalai (1997). Unobserved delegation. *International Economic Review*, 763–774.
- Friedman, D. and N. Singh (2009). Equilibrium vengeance. *Games and Economic Behavior* 66(2), 813–829.
- Gauer, F. and C. Kuzmics (2020). Cognitive empathy in conflict situations. *International Economic Review* 61(4), 1659–1678.
- Goerg, S. J. and G. Walkowitz (2010). On the prevalence of framing effects across subject-pools in a two-person cooperation game. *Journal of Economic Psychology* 31(6), 849–859.
- Guth, W. and M. Yaari (1992). Explaining reciprocal behavior in simple strategic games: An evolutionary approach. In U. Witt (Ed.), *Explaining Process and Change: Approaches to Evolutionary Economics*. University of Michigan Press, Ann Arbor.
- Heifetz, A., C. Shannon, and Y. Spiegel (2007a). The dynamic evolution of preferences. *Economic Theory* 32(2), 251–286.
- Heifetz, A., C. Shannon, and Y. Spiegel (2007b). What to maximize if you must. *Journal of Economic Theory* 133(1), 31–57.
- Heller, Y. and E. Winter (2016). Rule rationality. *International Economic Review* 57(3), 997–1026.
- Heller, Y. and E. Winter (2020). Biased-belief equilibrium. *American Economic Journal: Microeconomics* 12(2), 1–40.
- Herold, F. and C. Kuzmics (2009). Evolutionary stability of discrimination under observability. *Games and Economic Behavior* 67(2), 542–551.
- Horan, S., P. Manzini, and M. Mariotti (2022). When is coarseness not a curse? comparative statics of the coarse random utility model. *Journal of Economic Theory* 202, 105445.
- Jehiel, P. (2005). Analogy-based expectation equilibrium. *Journal of Economic Theory* 123(2), 81–104.
- Jehiel, P. and F. Koessler (2008). Revisiting games of incomplete information with analogy-based expectations. *Games and Economic Behavior* 62(2), 533–557.



- Kahneman, D. and A. Tversky (1979). Prospect theory: An analysis of decision under risk. *Econometrica* 47(2), 263–292.
- Kakutani, S. (1941). A generalization of Brouwer’s fixed point theorem. *Duke mathematical journal* 8(3), 457–459.
- LiCalzi, M. and R. Mühlenbernd (2022). Feature-weighted categorized play across symmetric games. *Experimental Economics* 25(3), 1052–1078.
- Mas-Colell, A., M. D. Whinston, and J. R. Green (1995). *Microeconomic Theory*, Volume 1. New York: Oxford university press.
- Mengel, F. (2012a). Learning across games. *Games and Economic Behavior* 74(2), 601–619.
- Mengel, F. (2012b). On the evolution of coarse categories. *Journal of Theoretical Biology*.
- Mengel, F. (2018). Risk and temptation: A meta-study on prisoner’s dilemma games. *The Economic Journal* 128(616), 3182–3209.
- Milgrom, P. and J. Roberts (1990). Rationalizability, learning, and equilibrium in games with strategic complementarities. *Econometrica* 58(6), 1255–1277.
- Mohlin, E. (2014). Optimal categorization. *Journal of Economic Theory* 152, 356–381.
- Mullainathan, S. (2002). Thinking through categories. Unpublished manuscript, available at <https://oz.stern.nyu.edu/seminar/sp03/0313background.pdf>.
- Netzer, N. (2009). Evolution of time preferences and attitudes toward risk. *American Economic Review* 99(3), 937–55.
- Ok, E. A. and F. Vega-Redondo (2001). On the evolution of individualistic preferences: An incomplete information scenario. *Journal of economic theory* 97(2), 231–254.
- Potters, J. and S. Suetens (2009). Cooperation in experimental games of strategic complements and substitutes. *The Review of Economic Studies* 76(3), 1125–1147.
- Renou, L. (2009). Commitment games. *Games and Economic Behavior* 66(1), 488–505.
- Robson, A. J., L. A. Whitehead, and N. Robalino (2023). Adaptive utility. *Journal of Economic Behavior & Organization* 211, 60–81.
- Schelling, T. C. (1960). *The Strategy of Conflict*. Harvard University Press, Cambridge, MA.

- Simon, H. A. (1955). A behavioral model of rational choice. *The Quarterly Journal of Economics* 69(1), 99–118.
- Steiner, J. and C. Stewart (2015). Price distortions under coarse reasoning with frequent trade. *Journal of Economic Theory* 159, 574–595.
- Strulov-Shlain, A. (2019). More than a penny’s worth: Left-digit bias and firm pricing. Chicago Booth Research Paper No. 19-22.
- Suetens, S. and J. Potters (2007). Bertrand colludes more than cournot. *Experimental Economics* 10(1), 71–77.
- Winter, E., L. Méndez-Naya, and I. García-Jurado (2017). Mental equilibrium and strategic emotions. *Management Science* 63(5), 1302–1317.
- Young, H. P. (2015). The evolution of social norms. *Annual Review of Economics* 7(1), 359–387.